

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools

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Foreword

The English independent schools sector, one of the most historic and well-reputed in the world, is at a fork in the road. After decades of fluctuating political pressure and public support, it has become clear that the future for the sector will not be able to look the same as its past. A new path has to be chosen and a vision articulated for the purpose of independent schooling, for how it can thrive, and for how it can best contribute to the whole school system.

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools does this. It provides a comprehensive picture of independent schooling today and uses this picture, alongside five principles for what the sector can aspire to be, to set out a vision for the future landscape of independent schooling in England. The recommendations outlined look to cultivate a sector that displays excellence, cultural breadth, independence, accessibility, and collaboration.

Independence allows schools the freedom to carve out different paths. The result of this is a sector that is characterised by its breadth in context, content, and philosophy. Responding to this, the Commission's work began with an extensive consultation, looking to develop an understanding of the nuances and diversity within the independent sector.

The variety within the sector means that there cannot and should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. Success means different things to different schools, and the appropriate next steps forward and long-term vision will vary accordingly. The Commission has, however, identified four paths to explore for the sector's future: enhancing partnerships with state schools; exploring opportunities for schools to partner with local and civic organisations to meet community need; promoting the development of specialist and mid-market independent schooling; and expanding access for the most disadvantaged pupils.

Partnership has been a central theme of recent decades in education. A successful independent sector must have a constructive relationship with state education. This can be a realm of mutual learning, creativity, and educational improvement if it comes with a clear long-term vision and strategy.

More broadly, the Commission looks at how the independent sector can simultaneously aspire to be collaborative and independent: how schooling that is free to be unique and

that provides parents with choice can enhance local communities, and can be distinctive without being isolationist.

Finally, the Commission explores how the independent sector can think creatively in order to enhance accessibility. This can unlock the transformational potential of an exceptional education for the most disadvantaged children.

Together, the Commission on the Future for Independent Schools provides the starting point for using this pivotal moment as a way of reinvigorating the sector's vision for itself and its contribution to the whole education system.

Edward Davies, Policy Director at The Centre for Social Justice

Jodh Dhesi, Chief Executive Officer of the King Edward VI Foundation,
Birmingham

John Edward, Member, Commission on School Reform (Scotland)

Unity Jones, Director of Network Advancement at Lift Schools

Barney Northover, Partner at VWV, specialising in strategic and governance
advice for schools

Professor Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive at the Chartered College of
Teaching

Diana Young, Freelance Writer, Marketing & Communications Specialist,
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About the Commission

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools

Civitas has conducted research for a major Commission on the future for independent schools in England.

We are hoping to contribute to the public debate by providing a balanced and in-depth review of independent schools and their role in England today, as well as a constructive long-term vision for their future.

Our research involved consultation with experts from a wide range of perspectives, as well as nationally representative opinion polling to understand in detail how independent schools are seen by the public. We are honoured to have had a panel of commissioners with a broad range of expertise in the education sector advising us in this work. All commissioners have contributed in a personal capacity.

This Commission would not have been possible without Daniel Lilley's research, data gathering and analysis, sector-wide consultation and drafting skills, bringing together original data and testimonies into core, thematic narratives.

We are also especially grateful to Ellen Pasternack, Jim McConalogue, Frank Young, Jonah Taylor, Rachel Neal, and Claire Daley for their work on this report.

Commissioners

Edward Davies

Policy Director, The Centre for Social Justice

Edward Davies was the Policy Director of The Centre for Social Justice for five years from 2016 before joining the Department for Health and Social Care in 2021 as an Expert Advisor to the Secretary of State. In 2023, he returned as Policy Director of the Centre for Social Justice.

Jodh Dhesi

Chief Executive Officer of the King Edward VI Foundation, Birmingham

Jodh Dhesi has been the Chief Executive Officer of the King Edward VI Foundation, Birmingham since 2021. Before this, he had roles as the Head of School Performance and Standards and Deputy Chief Executive Officer at GEMS Education, as well as experience on the Executive Board and as a Headteacher in the Cambridge Academic Partnership. Jodh is also a Board Trustee of the School Partnerships Alliance.

John Edward

Head of Operations of the Scottish Council on Global Affairs

John Edward has been the Head of Operations of the Scottish Council on Global Affairs since 2023. Before this, he was the Director of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools from 2010 to 2023 and the Head of the European Parliament Office in Scotland from 2003 to 2009. John is also a Board Trustee of the Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools and a member of the Commission for School Reform in Scotland.

Unity Jones

Director of Network Advancement at Lift Schools

Unity Jones has been the Director of Network Advancement at Lift Schools (formerly the Academies Enterprise Trust) since 2021. Unity leads strategic improvement across the 57 community schools at Lift which operate across 26 local authorities in England. Before this, she was at the New Schools Network from 2015 to 2021, where she was Director from 2019 to 2021.

Barney Northover

Partner at VVV

Barney Northover is a Partner at Veale Wasbrough Vizards (VWV), where he has been for 25 years. Barney leads the Education Sector at VWV and specialises in strategic and governance advice for schools. He is also a Board Trustee of the Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools.

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Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching

Dame Alison Peacock has been the Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching since 2017. Before this, she was the Executive Headteacher of The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire. In 2018, she became an Honorary Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge. She is also an Honorary Fellow of Hughes Hall, Cambridge and University College London as well as a Visiting Professor of the University of Hertfordshire and Glyndwr University. Dame Alison was awarded the rank of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in 2014 for services to education.

Diana Young

Freelance Writer, Marketing & Communications Specialist, Education Commentator

Diana Young is a freelance writer and commentator on education policy, contributing to *Schools Week* magazine since 2022 with insights on education and governance. Since 2019, she has also served as a maintained school governor, using her expertise to support school leadership and governance.

Funding

Civitas is very grateful to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and the following member associations for their support for this Commission: Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools (AGBIS); The Heads' Conference (HMC); Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS); Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA); The Society of Heads.

Defining independent schools

Independent Schools

Independent schools are administered and funded independently of the Government. These schools are also known as **private schools**. The two terms are synonymous according to the Government,¹ although independent is used by the sector itself. There are a multitude of administrative differences in how independent schools operate compared to other schools.

The distinction can be summarised in five elements of independent schools' autonomy:

1. The autonomy to select their intake of pupils.
2. The autonomy to select their teachers, and these teachers need not have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).
3. Setting their own curriculum, without needing to follow the national curriculum.
4. Independent governance. They are administered by governors, not local authorities.
5. Financial independence; they do not receive government funding and instead rely primarily on fee income. This also allows them independence to seek income through other means, such as international franchising.

The Government consider the fifth of these elements to be the defining element of independent school independence. It is also the only element unique to independent schools: grammar schools can academically select pupils, faith schools can select on faith, both **Academies** and **Free schools** can hire teachers without QTS and can divert from the national curriculum.² Importantly, **Academies can receive donations from parents**, and are therefore free to *suggest* de facto fees, albeit with no enforcement.

Independent Schools Council (ISC) schools are also inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), instead of Ofsted. This is often a point of difference appreciated by independent schools as the ISI are generally considered to be flexible in understanding schools taking different approaches.

This Commission does not include home-schooling as independent schooling. An estimated 86,200 children were home educated in England as of January 2023.³

Similar types of schools

Academies: Academies are state-funded schools that are run by an Academy trust. They are charities, but they do not and cannot charge compulsory fees. They do not need to follow the national curriculum and they can set their own term times. They are inspected by Ofsted. Some schools choose to become an Academy (**converter Academies**), whereas those who are rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted have been required to become an Academy (**sponsor Academies**) this is expected to change under the current government.⁴

¹ UK Government. *Types of school*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/private-schools> (Accessed: 5 January 2024).

² Ibid.

³ Long, R. and Danechi, S. (2023) *Home education in England*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05108/SN05108.pdf> (Accessed: 28 October 2024).

⁴ UK Government. *Types of school*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/Academies> (Accessed: 5 January 2024).

Free schools: Free schools are state-funded schools administered independently of the local authority. They are set up by groups such as charities and universities, and run on a not-for-profit basis. Once they have been set up, they are the same as Academies. They are non-selective but have independence over term times, staff recruitment and pay, and curriculum – although they are still inspected by Ofsted.⁵ In this sense, the difference between Free schools and Academies is in their initiation, not how they operate.

Understanding these elements is important as England’s definition of independent schools is not universal. This observation is underlined by the fact that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results defined Academies as independent under the title ‘Government-dependent private schools’.⁶

Associations and non-association independent schools

One important distinction within the independent schools sector is one that has already featured in this chapter a number of times, which is that of schools within or outside of the **Independent Schools Council (ISC)**. Those schools which are not members of the ISC are referred to as **non-association independent schools**.

The ISC represents 53 per cent of independent schools and 86 per cent of independent school pupils in England. These two numbers are so different as non-association independent schools are on average only a little over a sixth of the size of ISC schools (70 pupils versus 396 pupils).

ISC constituent and affiliated associations

Within the ISC there are a number of school associations, within which there are those which constitute the ISC, and those which are simply affiliated with it. Many schools are members of multiple associations. Some of these associations are cross-sector, with independent and state school members.

Constituent: Girls’ Schools Association (GSA), The Head’s Conference (HMC), Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS), Independent Schools Association (ISA), The Society of Heads, Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools (AGBIS) and Independent Schools’ Bursars Association (ISBA).

Affiliated: Boarding Schools’ Association (BSA), Council of British International Schools (COBIS), Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Welsh Independent Schools Council (WISC).

Other groups

Special schools are defined by government as schools that specifically cater to children with special educational needs. Special schools can further specialise into one of four areas of special educational needs.⁷

⁵ UK Government. *Types of school*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/free-schools> (Accessed: 5 January 2024).

⁶ OECD. *PISA 2018 Results (Volume V): Effective Policies Successful Schools, Chapter 7. Private schools and school choice*. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-results-volume-v_ca768d40-en (Accessed: 5 April 2024).

⁷ UK Government. *Types of school*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school> (Accessed: 5 January 2024).

Specialist schools are not an officially defined group in the UK, although they are in other countries such as New Zealand.⁸ These are schools which offer a defined and distinct education to their students. Most obviously, we can consider orthodox (used loosely) Jewish and Muslim schools and those with a specialist educational philosophy such as Montessori or Steiner schools. This also include schools with a particular specialism such as music and dance schools. This term is used throughout this report and features in the recommendations.

Charitable status

Schools with charitable status receive tax exemptions, have to comply with charity law and are non-profit. Within the sector exist both charitable and commercial, or for-profit, schools.

⁸ Live and Work New Zealand. *The school system*. Available at: <https://www.live-work.immigration.govt.nz/live-in-new-zealand/education-and-schooling/the-school-system> (Accessed: 15 October 2024).

Executive summary and recommendations

Understanding the sector

Chapter 1. What do independent schools look like?

A 'typical' independent school

- There is substantial diversity across independent schools in terms of style, scale and context, but independent schools are most often small, mixed-age, coeducational, day schools that opened fairly recently. Almost half opened since 1990; 53 per cent have fewer than 150 pupils; 45 per cent are mixed-age (and 59 per cent of pupils attend mixed-age schools); 83 per cent are coeducational and 81 per cent are day schools.
- The independent schools sector also displays significant diversity across ethnicity, religion, and special educational needs. Forty-two per cent of independent school pupils are of an ethnic minority, compared to 39 per cent of state school pupils; 63 per cent of pupils attend schools with a religious character; and 22 per cent of pupils have a diagnosed Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND), compared to 17 per cent in the state sector.

How big is the independent schools sector?

- Around 6.5 per cent of all school pupils in England attend independent schools. This has remained between 5.7 per cent and 8.1 per cent since 1963.
- Across age groups, an estimated four to five per cent of pupils in Years 1 to 6, eight to 10 per cent of pupils in Years 7 to 11 and 17 to 20 per cent of pupils in sixth form attend independent schools. Across the country, the sector is most concentrated in London and the South East, where over 10 per cent of pupils are independently educated. In the rest of the country, less than five per cent are independently educated.

Important groups and distinctions

- **Definition:** There are five elements to independence: curriculum, recruitment, selection, governance and financial. Financial is the defining characteristic in England – the only one not shared by any other school type.
- **Association:** The sector can be separated into association – or ISC – schools and non-association schools. The ISC account for 53 per cent of schools but 86 per cent of pupils.
- **Charitable status:** Schools with charitable status receive tax exemptions, have to comply with charity law and do not make profits. Within the sector exist both charitable and commercial, or for-profit, schools.

Chapter 2. What is the benefit of independent schools?

Why should we have an the independent schools sector?

Most arguments follow one or both of two strands: rights and social capital.

- **Rights:** The rights argument is that the state does not have the right to prohibit individuals from conducting any formal education that has no direct state oversight. Also, parents have a right to spend money on improving their children's lives, where they are able. This includes a right to paid-for schooling.
- **Social capital:** The social capital argument is that the independent school sector is valuable to the country. That the sector is high quality, has a historical and cultural significance, and is a large political and economic asset.

The benefit of independent schools to their parents and pupils

The benefit of independent schools to their parents and pupils is typically articulated in two overlapping strands: schooling outcomes (as an investment) and schooling experience (as consumption).

- **Schooling outcomes:** Independent schooling is effective at providing its students with excellent academic outcomes. These offer improved expected future career prospects.
- **Schooling experience:** Independent schooling offers a holistic and enriching schooling experience. Pupils get to experience a substantial breadth in what is offered, and an education tailored to them where their passions and skills are identified and nurtured.

The benefit of independent schools to education, society and the economy

The public benefit of independent schools is questioned more widely than their benefit to parents and pupils, and this was reflected in the consultation. The argument for public benefit tends to revolve around five axes:

- **Performance:** Through the independent sector's performance, it drives national educational standards, fills highly skilled professions and ensures excellence in areas such as sport and performing arts.
- **Economic contribution:** The independent sector is a substantial economic asset to the country. It has a large economic footprint, including as an export industry, and has an enviable international standing as a global leader in schooling.
- **Spreading resource:** Independent schools generate and share significant educational resource that this country otherwise would not have, through increasing private investment in education, reducing the need for state funding, and partnering to share this resource.
- **Transforming disadvantage:** Independent schools demonstrate excellence at providing transformational education to the most disadvantaged children. Through this, they can act as agents of social mobility.

- **Innovation:** Independent schools have the freedom to pursue different ideas and philosophies in order to improve educational standards and approaches across the country.

Chapter 3. Fees and affordability

How expensive is an independent school place?

- The average annual day fee at day ISC schools in England was £18,600 for the 2023/24 academic year. Average annual boarding fees in England were £42,519.
- From 1980 to 2016, independent school fees trebled in real terms and doubled as a proportion of 95th percentile income. The growth since then has been slower, but still faster than inflation and growth in incomes.
- Across the nine regions of England, average day fees vary by more than £8,000. They are highest in London, where they are on average £21,729 a year (including nursery fees).

How accessible are independent schools?

- **Financial support:** Just over a third of ISC pupils receive fee assistance from schools, but this excludes those who receive informal support from family and/or friends. Our polling found that, all included, 65 per cent of independent school parents receive help paying for fees.
- **View of affordability:** Parents' conception of whether they can afford independent schools varies substantially. Under half of those with a self-reported household income of £55,000 to £76,000 said that they could afford independent schooling, and only 10 per cent of this group said that they could afford it easily.
- **Who uses independent schools?** Thirty-seven per cent of parents whose children attend independent schools have a self-reported household income above £118,000. The ninth decile household income in the UK is £83,472 and the tenth is £148,086.
- **Why parents do or do not use independent schooling:** The main reason parents choose to use independent schooling is the standard of education, with 36 per cent citing it as the main reason, more than double any other answer. The main reason parents have chosen not to use independent schooling is that they cannot afford it, with 53 per cent citing it as the main reason, more than triple any other answer.

The independent schools sector within the wider school system

Chapter 4. The independent and state school sectors: Incomes

The resource gap and independent and state school incomes

- Estimates for the total income gap vary, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates that ISC schools have around 90 per cent more income per pupil than state schools. The pupil-teacher ratio – how many pupils there are for each teacher – is 18.1 in the state sector and just 8.8 in the ISC.

- Average state school income is an estimated £7,690 per pupil for 2024/25.⁹ Almost all of this, 93.5 per cent, is per-pupil funding, with each pupil having a specific funding allocation according to a basic rate plus a lump sum for each additional need they have. State schools also receive separate funding for capital projects.
- Independent school income is mostly derived from fees. There is no aggregate official data for the exact proportion which is derived from fees, but consultees estimated it at typically between 95 and 98 per cent.
- Income is therefore significantly decided by pricing – upon which there are upwards and downwards demand pressures. Other income streams include monetising expertise, monetising facilities, monetising brand and donations and legacies. These are more realistic for larger, older schools.

Chapter 5. The independent and state school sectors: Outcomes

The independent-state performance gap

- **Performance comparison:** At GCSE, 47 per cent of independent school GCSE grades in 2023 were grade 7 or higher, compared with 19 per cent at secondary comprehensive schools, 20 per cent at Free schools, 21 per cent at Academies, and 59 per cent at secondary selective schools.¹⁰ At A-Level, in 2023, 75 of the top 100 schools for getting A* and A grades were independent schools and the average grade is a B+, compared to an average of a C+ at state schools.
- **Value-add impact:** There has been a number of studies into the value-add of independent schools. Their conclusions vary but taken together they suggest that, controlling for socioeconomic context, pupils gain an advantage of several grades across their best eight GCSEs at independent schools, and a further grade or so across their A-Levels above what they would be expected to achieve at a state school.

The relationship between the state and independent school sectors

- **Partnership:** There is a large amount of independent-state school partnership, with the ISC annual census reporting at least 9,248 partnership activities in the last year. The nature of partnership activities, or extent of state school involvement, is not especially clear due to difficulties in reporting.
- **Challenges:** Consultees highlighted three major challenges to partnership activity: the lack of organised reporting, the lack of state school participation and the lack of coordination, especially with geographic unevenness. There is also a scale limitation, as there are 17 state schools for every ISC school in England.

⁹ UK Government (2024) *School funding statistics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-funding-statistics> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

¹⁰ Ofqual. *GCSE outcomes by centre type*. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/GCSE/CentreType/> (Accessed: 2 April 2024).

Chapter 6. Perception of independent schools

The public view: A snapshot

- **A right to exist and a right investment:** The public overwhelmingly support the right of independent schools to exist and of parents to use them. Seventy-two per cent of the public think that it is right for parents to use independent schools, and just 10 per cent think it is wrong.
- **A high-quality sector:** The public overwhelmingly see independent schools as high-quality, and 65 per cent of parents view them as generally better than state schools.
- **Exclusive:** The word most commonly associated with independent schools is 'exclusive' (46 per cent). The most common positive word associated was 'aspirational' with 15 per cent.
- **Benefit worth spreading:** When looking at different policy perspectives, including taxation, charitable status removal and an extension of bursaries and scholarships, by far the proposal most likely to make the public view the sector more favourably was extending bursary and scholarship provision, with 48 per cent of the public saying it would make them view the sector more favourably.

The political view: A short history

- **Surge of pressure (1956-1978):** Following the 1956 release of *The Future of Socialism* by Anthony Crosland, independent schooling became a target of the Labour Party, who considered banning or taxing independent schools on a number of occasions, although always considered it ultimately too extreme.
- **Relative comfort (1979-1997):** This era of pressure ended abruptly with the Thatcher government of 1979. What followed was 18 years of relative fondness from government, encapsulated by the Assisted Places Scheme.
- **Return to attention (2006-2013):** Following a period of quiet on the sector (1997-2006), there was a sharp return to attention initiated by the Charities Act 2006, which culminated in a legal case between the ISC and the Charity Commission.
- **Mounting challenge (2014-Present):** From 2014, independent schools have faced mounting pressure from both major parties, especially from Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, leading to a unique tax policy imposed on the sector by the 2024 Labour government.

Four futures to explore for the future of independent schooling

- **Enhancing partnership with state schools:** Seeking a collaborative and world-class sector by improving the reporting and coordination of partnership work.
- **Schools as community hubs meeting social need:** Exploring independent schools as community hubs, and looking at how a more holistic understanding of partnership can lead to a vision of independent schools delivering on society's greatest needs by unleashing the opportunities of independence.

- **Specialist and mid-market independent schooling:** The cultural breadth and accessibility of the independent sector depends on schools that are different and schools that are affordable. Evaluating how to expand the market of schooling that charges fees but where these fees are less than around £12,000 a year.
- **Levelling the playing field for the most disadvantaged:** The way that excellent independent schooling can transform the lives and opportunities of disadvantaged children has been demonstrated and the vision is to expand that.

Recommendations

Chapter 7. Enhancing partnerships with state schools

Recommendations

1. **Introduce a partnership reporting template for Schools Together contributions:** Independent-state school partnership can tighten its coherence and clarity with one template that all partnerships follow and report within. This would also open the door to an accreditation system.
2. **Department for Education regional directors to launch regional partnership databases for matching supply with demand:** This coherence and clarity of reporting would allow simplified partnership opportunities and an ideas-matching system through publishing partnership opportunities on regional Department for Education (DfE) partnership databases.
3. **Joining up teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD):** Government commitment to joining up across the sectors' Initial Teacher Training schemes with placements visits and shared CPD within each region.

Chapter 8. Schools as community hubs meeting social need

Recommendations

4. **Define a school 'community hub':** A broader understanding of independent schools partnering with local communities can be defined through an understanding of 'community hubs'. Community hub schools host activities that enhance their local community.
5. **Explore opportunities for 'anchoring hubs':** Independent schools form anchoring hubs when partnering with local and civic organisations that are not schools – such as healthcare and other social services – to join up and coordinate different services in areas in order to be able to respond more holistically to complex needs.
6. **Explore opportunities for 'innovation hubs':** Independent schools form innovating hubs when a major element of what or how they operate is clearly distinctive from the norm, and the result is a novel schooling offered.
7. **Long-term reform: Coordinating innovation through one overarching ISC innovation hub:** Existing ISC associations could work together and bring their respective innovation and improvement groups under one banner for the benefit of economies of scale and clearer advocacy for the sector as a whole.

Chapter 9. Specialist and mid-market independent schooling

Recommendations

8. **A government commitment to a better understanding of the independent schools sector:** The Department for Education should know the charitable status and fees of every independent school, alongside existing data on religious character and size.
9. **Independent schools sector to commission research into exploring the viability and circumstances of specialist and mid-market independent schools:** This research can examine whether the mid-market of independent schooling could present an opportunity for a more affordable independent education sector.
10. **Long-term reform: A new generation of specialist and mid-market independent schools:** Independent schools that are specialist – innovating or preserving cultural heritage and religious freedom – could receive partial state funding, alongside those that are mid-market, conditional on their accessibility. The maximum grant would be approximately £4,000, half of the state school funding rate, and would taper with increasing fees, with independent schools losing 50p of grant funding for each £1 fee increase between £4,000 and £12,000.

Chapter 10. Levelling the playing field for the most disadvantaged

Recommendations

11. **Government strategy to improve care leaver progression to university:** Independent schools, in particular through Lumina and Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation, should form an explicit part of the government’s much-needed and promised strategy to improve care leaver progression into university.
12. **Pupil premium independent school eligibility:** Pupil premium, where disadvantaged pupils are entitled to additional state funding for their schooling, paid to state schools, should be made eligible on a trial basis to disadvantaged children attending independent schools, conditional on increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children at independent schools.
13. **Pupil premium VAT exemption:** If, over the course of the initial trial period, this is shown to be successful in increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children at independent schools, then it should be expanded such that independent school fees of disadvantaged children are VAT exempt.
14. **Independent schools bursary charity:** The independent sector could launch a new bursary charity that would take annual contributions from independent schools for means-tested bursaries in order to work together as a sector to increase the number of disadvantaged children at independent schools.
15. **Long-term reform: Extend the state National Funding Formula (NFF) entitlement for the most disadvantaged children so that it includes independent schools:** The two incremental pupil premium policies, if successful, would lay the foundations for structural reform of the educational opportunity of disadvantaged children. This could be done by extending their NFF entitlement, paid to schools, to include

independent schools. Top-up fees would be prohibited such that this would mean that independent schools would have to charge complete bursaries to qualify for the disadvantaged pupil's entitlements.

Introduction

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools has been established to understand the purpose of independent education, what a successful independent education system in England would look like in the future, and possible reforms to help us get there over the long-term.

The Commission's work has been structured around four aspects across ten chapters. The first part of the Commission seeks to properly understand the independent sector. It aims to understand what the sector looks like and what its role and benefit is to those who use it and to wider society. The questions of size, scale, geography, benefit and affordability are needed for a clear and realistic approach to the sector.

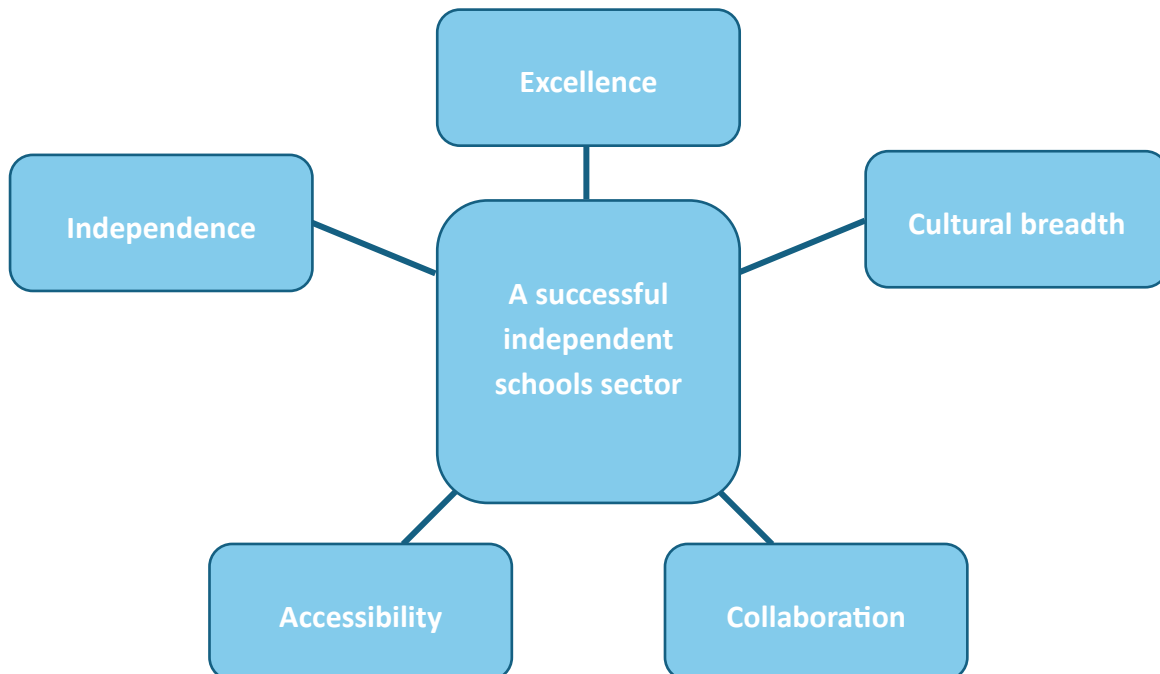
The second part of the Commission looks to understand how the independent schools sector sits within the wider school system. This includes an interrogation of the respective incomes and outcomes of independent and state schools, and the relationship that the two sectors have with one another. It also includes the reputation of the independent education sector and how it is viewed by both the public and political parties.

Informed by this evidence base, the Commission on the Future for Independent Schools sets out four broad areas for reform in Part 3: enhancing partnerships with state schools, schools as community hubs meeting social need, specialist and mid-market independent schooling, and targeting disadvantage. These areas look at the contribution of independent schooling, aspirational values for the sector to strive towards in the long-term and a discussion of possible reforms to realise a positive and constructive vision. It looks to learn lessons from international and historic domestic examples, as well as propositions from government and the independent sector, to see how reforms could work in practice.

Part 4, the concluding part, details the Commission's vision for the future of independent schooling. A sweeping set of reforms are offered by the Commission which build upon the sector's capacity to enhance partnerships with the state school sector, deliver on society's greatest needs, grow the mid-market of independent schools, and level the playing field for the most disadvantaged.

Aspiration values behind a vision of a successful independent schools sector

The vision of the future for independent schools that is proposed in the Commission rests on five values that we would aspire to see in a thriving independent schools sector in England.



Excellence

The vision starts with quality. The foundational purpose of education is passing on the knowledge, skills and attitudes to prepare for adult life. Therefore, the vision for any part of the education sector must start with good teaching. Any vision for the independent sector should be one of a sector that is as high-quality as possible, as exceptional as possible, and as internationally and domestically acclaimed as possible.

Cultural breadth

Preservation of culture forms another foundational value of independent education. The freedom for difference that comes with educational independence and the need for difference that comes with needing to generate income independently results in an independent sector with a striking cultural breadth.

We can measure the cultural breadth and preservation of the sector through a multitude of indicators. The breadth of curriculum, and preservation of subjects such as Greek and Latin, are an indicator. The contribution to national culture in terms of sport, music, and other performing arts – measured both through the provision at these schools and the outcomes of those schooled there – provide indicators. We also see a large cultural diversity in how the

independent sector protects religious schooling and in the ethnic diversity across those who attend.

Accessible

Our vision for the independent schools sector is of one that is fair. Fairness does not change the ambition that independent schools should always strive to be exceptional. It means that they should also strive to be as accessible as they can be. Independent schools charge fees, which will always be a cost not all are willing and able to pay. The sector is also comparatively small when compared with the state sector, which necessarily caps access, especially in areas where there are few independent schools. However, schools and government can think creatively about how to maximise access to the best schools.

It is not that independent schools should choose not to provide additional enriching opportunities and pursuits that they are able to on the grounds that other schools might not. It is instead that they should strive as far as reasonably possible to ensure that these opportunities are ones that can be opened up to the least advantaged as well as the most.

In our vision, we affirm that it is not wrong for parents to spend money on improving their children's education, as criticisms of the independent sector sometimes imply. Parental investment in education is a good thing, just like state investment is. The vision is that, far from parents being prevented from doing this, more parents can do so. Investment in the next generation is the lifeblood of education, and this requires financial resource – the vision is always to expand this.

Independent

Independent schools are best when they are free to carve out new and different paths, and free to explore new ideas. Our vision for the independent sector is one that is autonomous: one that can be distinctive, and one that can be a hotbed of innovation; one that can always be grounded in rigour and a commitment to quality, irrespective of the political tides of the day.

For some, independence means a highly tailored education to the children that attend which can evolve with their needs, and for others this means preserving timeless practices that have stood the test of time for millions of children over centuries; either way, the vision is of a sector where creative independence of thought and parental choice thrive.

Independent schools have legal autonomy; their five foundational freedoms of independence resting with the ability to define their own curriculum, staff recruitment, selection of pupils, and independence of governance and finances. For many independent schools, being inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate enhances this freedom, with what is generally seen as an inspection framework that, although no less rigorous, is more flexible in understanding schools taking different approaches.

Collaborative

Finally, but by no means least pertinently, our vision is a school system with a sense of unity. An independent schools sector that is collaborative and a whole school system of mutual learning. A system where independent schools and state schools thrive, and they work alongside each other. Independence is sustained with a clarity of purpose of better education for all. This vision includes measurable partnership; it also includes the broader outlook of independent schools and their relationship with the state school sector.

Collaboration need not be reduced to independent-state school partnerships. A socially entrepreneurial independent sector that looks to provide for, and support, the local community can form a broader picture of collaboration and of wider public benefit.

Part 1:

Understanding the sector

Most 21st Century debate on the independent schools sector relies heavily on 19th Century assumptions. It is common for commentators to conjure the image of grandiose educational institutions that more closely resemble the halls of the Palace of Westminster than the local independent school.

Those who do this know – and often acknowledge – that this does not exactly represent the independent schools sector, and yet they are consistently comfortable suggesting that this image is largely accurate. Many of our most famous politicians, actors, writers, musicians and sportspeople have been schooled at historic boarding schools. In the 2024 Parliamentary intake, 23 per cent were independently educated, down from 29 per cent in 2019, and 51 per cent in 1983.

In this context, it is crucial to articulate in detail what the independent schools sector actually looks like. In any sector this is necessary to shape recommendations for the future that are appropriate, but in the independent schools sector it is especially important as the understanding so many have depends on partial truths or limited experience. There is good reason why so many people understand the independent schools sector through the most famous few, but it is wrong to do in several important areas.

In this part, we seek to provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the independent schools sector in three chapters.

The first chapter asks the question ‘what do independent schools look like?’ We look at how one might characterise a ‘typical’ independent school, at how independent schools are geographically distributed in England, and at important distinctions between groups within the sector.

The second chapter looks at the question of ‘why?’ We evaluate how the independent schools sector understands itself; how it justifies its continued existence, what independent schools provide to their students and what the independent schools sector sees as its wider benefit to society.

The third chapter looks at the cost of independent schooling, often the key note in discussions around the independent schools sector. The chapter looks at the detail of independent school fees, how they have continued to grow in the last decade and how they vary across the country. It then looks at the impact of fees on affordability; the extent to which parents desire to send their children to independent schools and how much they feel that it is realistic. Within this, the chapter also discusses the characteristics of those families who do use independent schooling.

Together, this part paints a picture of a diverse, impressive and high-quality independent sector, full of small specialist institutions as well as a few large grand ones. It also paints a picture of an independent schools sector that is not easily accessible for much of the country.

Chapter 1.

What do independent schools look like?

The Commission's work begins by sketching an image of a 'typical' independent school. A number of features are discussed to analyse what independent schools most commonly look like. We see that they are most typically small, mixed-age, coeducational day schools which opened reasonably recently. We also see that they are ethnically and religiously highly diverse.

The next section looks at the size of the independent schools sector. The independent schools sector educates seven per cent of children; we wish also to understand how this has changed over time, how it changes across junior, secondary, and sixth form schooling and how it varies across England.

Having established a conception of the sector on aggregate, this chapter then looks more granularly at components of the independent schools sector. This first requires clarity about the definition of independent schools in England and why Academies and Free schools are not considered to be independent in the UK, even though they would be in other parts of the world. The chapter finally looks at two important but often ignored groups within the independent schools sector: non-association independent schools, and schools in commercial school groups.

Chapter summary

A 'typical' independent school

- **Size:** Small, 53 per cent of all independent schools have fewer than 150 pupils. On the other hand, of course, many children attend the few largest schools.
- **Age of school:** Most independent schools opened recently, almost half opened since 1990, over a third opened since the beginning of 2010.
- **Age of pupils:** Most often mixed-age, accounting for 45 per cent of schools and 59 per cent of pupils.
- **Sex of entry:** Typically coeducational, 83 per cent of schools and 77 per cent of pupils.
- **Ethnicity:** Within the ISC, 42 per cent of pupils are of an ethnic minority, compared to 39 per cent of state school pupils.
- **Boarding and day:** Typically day, only 19 per cent of independent schools have any boarders, and just 12 per cent of ISC pupils board.
- **Religious character:** Schools are typically non-religious (59 per cent have no religious character), but, due to differing school size, 55 per cent of pupils attend Christian schools.
- **Special Educational Needs or Disability (SEND):** More prevalent in the independent sector, with 22 per cent of pupils having a diagnosed SEND, compared to 17 per cent in the state sector.

How big is the independent schools sector?

- **Over time:** Around 6.5 per cent of pupils attend independent schools. This has remained between 5.7 per cent and 8.1 per cent since 1963.
- **By age group:** Exact proportions are unclear but an estimated four to five per cent of pupils in Years 1 to 6, eight to 10 per cent of pupils in Years 7-11 and 17 to 20 per cent of pupils in sixth form attend independent schools.
- **By geography:** It varies considerably. The sector is most concentrated in London and the South East, where over 10 per cent of pupils are independently educated. In the rest of the country, less than five per cent are independently educated and some 38 local authorities have less than two per cent of pupils attending independent schools.

Important groups and distinctions

- **Definition:** There are five elements to independence: curriculum, recruitment, selection, governance and financial. Financial is the defining characteristic in England – the only not shared by any other school type.
- **Association:** The sector can be separated into association – or ISC – schools and non-association schools. The ISC account for 53 per cent of schools but 86 per cent of pupils.
- **Charitable status:** Schools with charitable status receive tax exemptions, have to comply with charity law and are non-profit. Within the sector exists both charitable and commercial, or for-profit, schools.

1.1 A 'typical' independent school

This opening section goes through Department for Education (DfE) data to sketch out a 'typical' independent school – this is to say, the characteristics that a majority of schools have.¹¹ One characteristic of the independent schools sector is that a 'typical' independent school does not exist – they vary phenomenally in shape, size, style, location, cohort, history and philosophy. The closest that the sector gets to typical can be described as being a school with under 300 pupils, that opened in the last 30 years, has a mixed-age cohort with some primary and some secondary provision, and is a coeducational day school with no religious character.

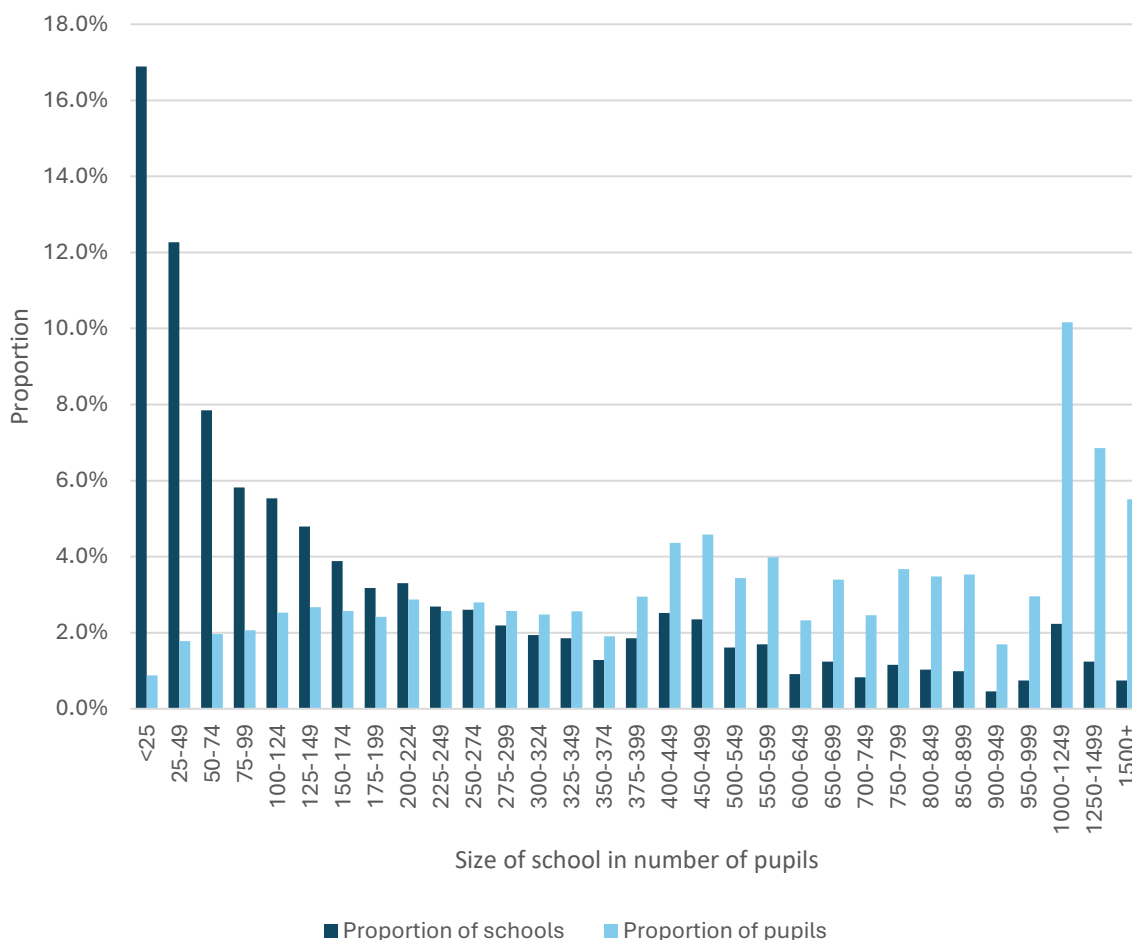
Size of independent schools

Figure 1.1 shows the breakdown of independent schools by how many pupils are at each school. Looking at the number of pupils (the light blue columns), we see that there is no 'typical' for the size of independent school *pupils study at*, with roughly a quarter of pupils studying at a school with each of under 300 pupils, 300-599 pupils, 600-999 pupils, and 1,000 or more pupils – a fairly even spread.

We do, however, see a clear 'typical' school size in terms of *number of schools*; independent schools are typically small. Fifty-three per cent have fewer than 150 pupils and 71 per cent have fewer than 300 pupils (Figure 1.1). The 102 independent schools with over 1,000 pupils make up just 4.2 per cent of independent schools, albeit educating 22.5 per cent of independent school pupils.

¹¹ Please see Appendix 1 for an explanation of how this data was collected and analysed.

Figure 1.1: Proportion of independent schools and pupils by size of the school in number of pupils, England, 2024/25



Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 6 September 2024). Note: this column chart omits 21 registered independent schools which are registered as having zero pupils.

Opening date of independent schools

Independent schools are typically relatively new organisations. Almost half of all independent schools have opened since 1990 and over a third have opened from 2010 onwards. There is a cohort of old schools, but it is fairly small: just 13 per cent of independent schools opened before 1940.¹²

Age groups

Independent school age groups have been defined in three groups: junior schools, senior schools and mixed-age schools. Junior schools are those which take pupils up to Year 6 or

¹² Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 5 October 2023).

Year 8; senior schools take pupils from Year 7 or Year 9, and mixed-age schools have some pupils below Year 7 and some beyond Year 8.

There is no clear ‘typical’ age group provision for independent schools, but the most common is mixed-age. Independent schools are reasonably evenly spread across age groupings, with more mixed-age schools (a group that is very uncommon in the state-funded sector)¹³ and fewer senior schools.

Table 1.1 shows, however, that a majority of independent school *pupils* are at mixed-age schools, as mixed-age schools are generally larger than junior and senior schools, as in the state-funded sector.¹⁴ Mixed-age school pupils account for almost three in five independent school pupils.

Senior schools are the least common in the independent sector, accounting for 26 per cent of schools and 17 per cent of pupils.

This data shows how independence leads to much less uniformity over age group provision.

Table 1.1: Independent schools by age group provision, England, 2024/25

Type of school	Number of schools	Proportion of independent schools	Proportion of independent school pupils	Average school size (number of pupils)
Junior	704	28.8%	23.6%	198.0
Mixed-age	1,100	45.0%	59.1%	318.1
Senior	638	26.1%	17.3%	160.7

Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).

Pupil characteristics: Sex and ethnicity

Sex of entry

The sex of entry of a school relates to whether it is all-boys, all-girls or coeducational (boys and girls). Independent schools are typically coeducational schools, with 83 per cent of schools being coeducational and 77 per cent of pupils being at coeducational schools.¹⁵

Single-sex education has been in gentle decline over the last decade, falling from 25 per cent of schools in 2013 to 18 per cent in 2024 within the Independent Schools Council (ISC) – an

¹³ UK Government (2023) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics#dataBlock-1e598701-4059-4d91-a4c5-4740047b1a74-tables> (Accessed: 14 September 2023).

¹⁴ UK Government (2023) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics#dataBlock-1e598701-4059-4d91-a4c5-4740047b1a74-tables> (Accessed: 14 September 2023).

¹⁵ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

association of just over half of independent schools. This trend is overwhelmingly due to single-sex schools becoming coeducational, not closing.

All-girls schools are noticeably larger than all-boys or coeducational schools in England.

Table 1.2: All independent schools, selected characteristics by sex of entry, England, 2024/25

Sex of entry	Number of schools	Proportion of schools	Total pupils	Proportion of pupils	Average pupil number
Single-sex: boys	187	7.7%	50,987	8.6%	272.7
Single-sex: girls	226	9.3%	87,755	14.8%	388.3
Co-educational	2,029	83.1%	453,114	76.6%	223.3

Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).

Ethnicity

The aggregate ethnicity data for the entire independent schools sector is not readily available, but the available evidence of ISC schools suggests that independent schools have a higher proportion of pupils of an ethnic minority than state schools.

Within the ISC, which educates 86 per cent of all independent school students, 41.7 per cent of pupils in England were of ethnic minorities in 2024 compared with 38.7 per cent of state school pupils.¹⁶

This is particularly because ISC schools are concentrated in London, where over 60 per cent of ISC school pupils are of an ethnic minority.¹⁷ It is worth noting here that 77 per cent of all school pupils in London are of an ethnic minority, higher than the independent sector proportion.¹⁸

Pupils of an ethnic minority have been a steadily increasing share of school pupils across England since 2016, both in the maintained and independent sector. This has been especially fast in the independent sector. In 2009, 22.8 per cent of ISC pupils in England were of an ethnic minority,¹⁹ meaning that the proportion of pupils from an ethnic minority has

¹⁶ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024) and UK Government (2024) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

¹⁷ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

¹⁸ UK Government (2024) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

¹⁹ Independent School Council (2009) *ISC census and annual report 2009*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/2457/2009_annualcensus_isc.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024)

increased by over 80 per cent in 15 years. Interestingly, in that time, the proportion of non-British ISC pupils with parents overseas has remained fairly steady, with 4.2 per cent in 2009²⁰ and 4.7 per cent in 2024.²¹

Evidence from our consultation²² suggests that some of the large rise in the proportion of children of an ethnic minority attending independent schools may be due to parents moving their children to independent schools after experiencing discrimination or marginalisation.

Boarding and day provision

Independent schools typically have no boarders at all, and a large majority of independently educated children do not board.

An estimated 491 independent schools (20 per cent) have any boarding pupils,²³ and just 12 per cent of pupils in the ISC board.

This has been falling over the long-term, although the decline has slowed significantly. The most substantial drop in the number and share of ISC pupils boarding was during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1980, over a third of ISC pupils were boarders. This fell below 25 per cent in 1988 and then below 20 per cent in 1993. In 2024, 11.8 per cent of ISC pupils are boarders.

In the last decade, the fall in the proportion of boarders has been more a result of rising numbers of day pupils than it has been falling numbers of boarders. There are under 1,500 fewer boarding students in 2024 than in 2013. Figure 1.2, in the ISC context, illustrates very clearly that the decline in boarding is more a rise in day schools than a fall in boarding schools.

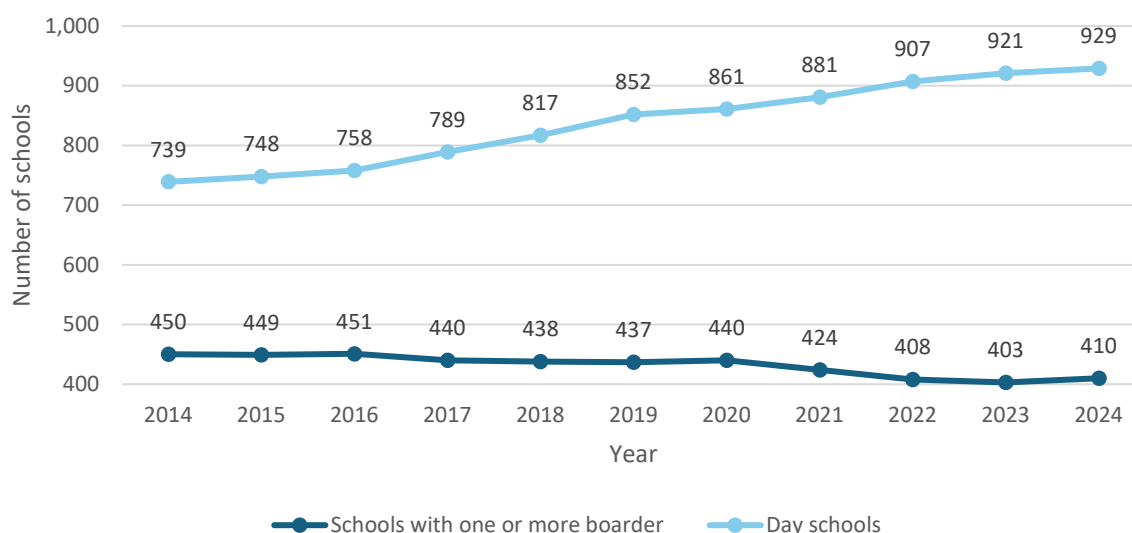
²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

²² See Appendix 2.

²³ Of these, 88 are non-association independent schools and 403 are ISC schools.

Figure 1.2: Boarding and day schools, ISC members, England, 2014-2024



Source: Independent School Council (2014-2024) *ISC census and annual reports 2014-2024*. Available at: <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/annual-census/> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

Religious character

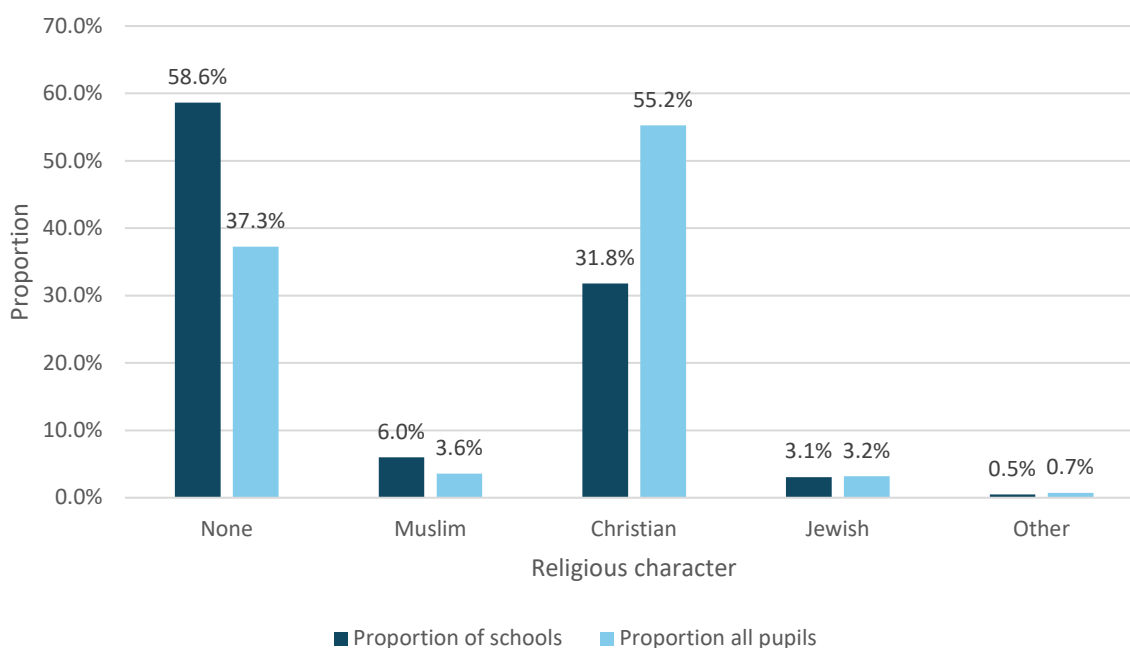
Faith schools (schools with a religious character) are quite common in the independent sector, accounting for over four in 10 schools. Around three quarters (77 per cent) of these faith schools are Christian schools (this includes Church of England schools, Catholic schools, and all other Christian denominations). Christian schools are also much larger on average than other independent schools, meaning that they educate 55 per cent of independent school pupils.

It is worth noting that there are some 4,630 Church of England schools (19 per cent of all schools in England) and 200 church schools in Wales in the state sector.²⁴

This leaves two observations, depending on measurement, of an independent schools sector where schools are typically of no religious character, but, due to the schools being much larger, pupils typically attend Christian schools.

²⁴ Church of England. *Church schools and Academies*. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-Academies> (Accessed: 11 September 2024).

Figure 1.3: Independent schools and pupils by religious character, England, 2024/25



Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*, Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Across all independent schools, 132,079 pupils (22.3 per cent) have SEND. Of these, one quarter have an education, health and care plan (EHCP), three quarters do not.²⁵

Focusing on association schools, ISC member schools have a slightly higher incidence of SEND than the state-funded sector, with 20.0 per cent of pupils having SEND, compared to 18.4 per cent of pupils in the state-funded sector.²⁶

Pupils with SEND are especially common in non-association independent schools because over half of these schools are special schools, who generally will exclusively have pupils with SEND. These pupils account for 23,074, or 17.3 per cent, of all independent school pupils with SEND. Across other non-association independent schools, pupils with SEND are much less common, accounting for 15.0 per cent of pupils, less than the national average across all schools.

It is possible, although not provable with the available data, that this variation in the incidence of SEND across state-funded, ISC, and non-association independent schools (with

²⁵ Department for Education (2023) *Special educational needs in England*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england#dataBlock-f2d15815-2952-4e3e-af55-1e5fdffb19c2-tables> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

²⁶ Department for Education (2024) *Special educational needs in England*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england#dataBlock-f2d15815-2952-4e3e-af55-1e5fdffb19c2-tables> (Accessed: 6 September 2024). Independent School Council (2024) *2024 Annual Census*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 6 September 2024).

the exception of special schools) is in part a result of the schools having a varied level of attention on, and tendency to diagnose, SEND. This is potentially a result of smaller class sizes in the independent sector, particularly independent schools that are in the ISC. On the other hand, contributions from our consultation suggest that parents with neurodivergent children – diagnosed or otherwise – are disproportionately likely to seek independent education for their children, due significantly to smaller class sizes. This is discussed later in the Commission.

The incidence of SEND is 77 per cent higher among pupils in senior schools (27.1 per cent) than in junior schools (15.3 per cent) in the independent sector. The proportion with an EHCP is also much higher, accounting for 10.4 per cent of junior school pupils with SEND, but 26.2 per cent of senior school pupils with SEND.

1.2 How big is the independent schools sector?

Now we have a conception of what each of these schools looks like, the remaining question is how large this independent sector is in England's school system. Here, it is fair to say that the reputation of independent schools outweighs the size of the sector, although, as we will see, this does vary substantially by geography and age group.

Independent schools account for 10.0 per cent of schools and 6.5 per cent of school pupils in England.²⁷ This is not an insignificant size – accounting for almost 2,500 schools and almost 600,000 pupils – but it is small enough that questions around access to the sector and the financial weight of the sector must be contextualised. There are some 15 pupils at state schools for each one at an independent school.²⁸

Size over time

Looking backwards, parliamentary research allows us to estimate with reasonable accuracy the size of the independent schools sector from 1963 to the present day as a proportion of all school pupils.²⁹ If we were to go much further, we would find that before state provision was introduced from 1870 onwards, with a gradual expansion over the subsequent decades, all schooling was independent schooling.

Generally, since 1963 there have been three trends; these same trends are present in Chapter 6.3 *The political view: A short history*.

In 1963, the independent schools sector was relatively large – larger than it has been ever since – schooling 8.1 per cent of pupils. This declined steadily and consistently until 1978, where it troughed at an estimated 5.7 per cent of pupils; a loss of almost a third of its share. It then rose steadily for a little over a decade to 7.4 per cent by 1990, and has moved very little since.

There was a decline in the 1990s and there has been a small rise since, but the sector has educated between 6.0 and 7.5 per cent of pupils since the early 1980s and has educated between an estimated 6.2 and 6.8 per cent of pupils since the late 1990s.

In a sentence, the proportion of pupils educated at independent schools has been stable over the long-term. This stability can be overestimated, as relative to the size of the sector the above changes are not insignificant, but the half century has nonetheless been stable, relative to the country as a whole.

Size by age group

The consistency that is found when looking backwards over the last half century of the independent schools sector cannot be found when looking across the sector by age group

²⁷ UK Government (2024) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bolton, P. (2012) *Education: Historical Statistics*. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf> (Accessed: 15 October 2024).

today. The independent schools sector commands an increasingly large share of the schooling market as children get older.³⁰

Three to four per cent of primary school pupils attend ISC schools,³¹ but for secondary school pupils this figure is eight to nine per cent.³² This is particularly due to a jump in sixth form numbers. ISC pupils make up an estimated 17-20 per cent of sixth formers, and seven to eight per cent of pupils from Years 7-11.³³ Approximately, this is two doublings: a doubling from primary to secondary (ages 11-16) and another doubling from secondary to sixth form.

These numbers notably exclude non-association independent school pupils, who account for 14.1 per cent of independent school pupils, or 0.9 per cent of all school pupils. Depending on the year group spread, this means that independent school pupils likely account for roughly five per cent at primary school, eight per cent from Years 7-11, and then as much as 20 per cent at sixth form.³⁴

These correspond with estimates from the UCL Institute of Education in 2016, which approximated that 5.0 per cent of pupils aged five to 10, 7.6 per cent of those aged 11-15 and 17.3 per cent of those aged 16 or over are independently schooled.³⁵

Size by geography

The independent schools sector is unevenly geographically distributed.

Independent schools are highly clustered around London and the South East of England. In London and the South East, 10.2 per cent of school pupils are independently educated, compared to just 4.7 per cent of school pupils in the rest of England.

In the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the East Midlands, independent school pupils make up less than four per cent of school pupils.

³⁰ It is worth noting that age group ISC data covers the UK, whilst state school data covers England. This adds a small margin of error in results. In light of this, the results have been adjusted but there remains a small margin of error, as is reflected in the write up.

³¹ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024) and UK Government (2024) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

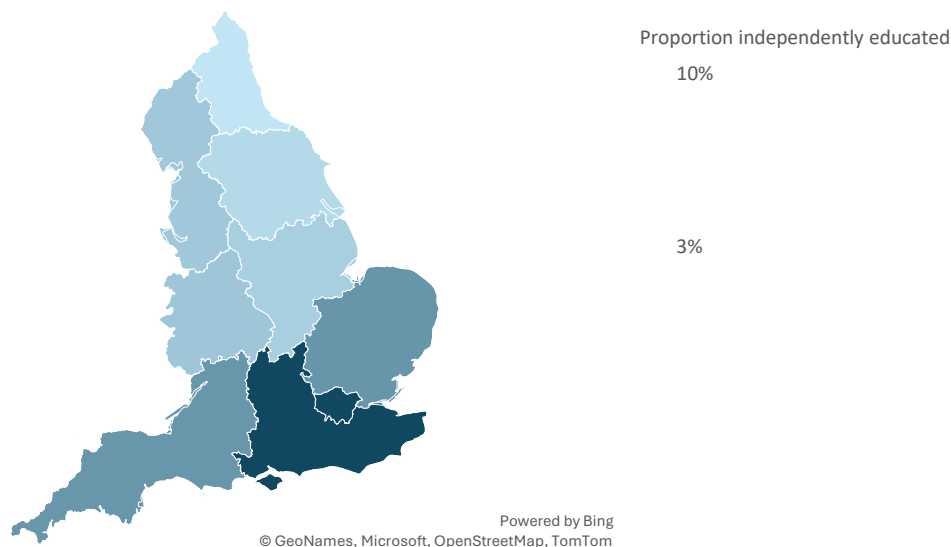
³² ISC (2023) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 15 October 2024). There are 336,907 ISC secondary school pupils (p31 of the 2023 ISC census) and 3,646,079 state-funded secondary school pupils.

³³ *Ibid.* There are 90,781 ISC sixth formers (p31 of the 2023 ISC census) and 446,993 state-funded sixth formers.

³⁴ These assume non-association independent schools make-up 14.053 per cent of independent pupils in each year group. The figures are 219,325 for primary, 391,995 for secondary and 105,625 for sixth formers. Note: due to the exclusion of nursery and double counting of sixth formers, none of these figures sum to the totals provided.

³⁵ Green, F. et al. (2017), *Who Chooses Private Schooling in Britain and Why?* UCL Institute of Education.

Figure 1.4: Proportion of school pupils independently educated by region, England, 2023/24



Source: Department for Education (2024) *School, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 6 September 2024)

The variation is more stark when looking at the independent school pupil share at a local authority level. A large number of local authorities have almost no independently educated children and a small number have a very large independent share.

In 37 upper-tier local authorities³⁶ (31 per cent of the total), independent school pupils make up less than two per cent of school pupils, including Nottinghamshire (1.1 per cent) and Liverpool (1.6 per cent). On the other extreme, in areas such as Kensington and Chelsea (44 per cent), Westminster (31 per cent) and Camden (31 per cent), independent school pupils make up over three in ten school pupils.

This creates a challenge for the independent sector that should not be underestimated. Table 1.3 looks at local authorities according to the percentage of school children that are at independent schools. It also shows how many children in total are educated in local authorities according to the proportion of pupils in the local authority that are at independent schools.

This shows that 17 per cent of all school children in England are schooled in local authorities where fewer than two per cent of children are at independent schools. Forty per cent of school children are educated in local authorities where fewer than four per cent of children are independently educated. It is not a surprise that the sector can seem out of touch to those in these areas.

³⁶ This analysis uses 'upper tier' local authorities, see Office for National Statistics (2023) *Area type definition Census 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/census2021dictionary/areatypedefinitions> (Accessed: 2 April 2024).

The flipside of this is that 42 per cent of *independent school* children are schooled in areas where independent schools are much more common, and independent school children account for over a tenth of all school children.

The fact that a sixth of school children are educated in areas with almost no incidence of independent schooling, and two in five are educated in areas where the incidence is significantly below the national average, creates a serious challenge for the sector as we will see later in the Commission.

An accessible independent schools sector needs to break into these areas. It cannot just achieve accessibility through making existing schools more affordable. New schools, a possibility of Academy to independent conversion, or some middle ground between the two, would be necessary to make independent schools genuinely accessible across the country.

Table 1.3: Children schooled at local authorities according the proportion of children independently educated in the local authority, 2023/24

Proportion of children independently educated	Number of Local Authorities	Proportion of all school children in England	Proportion of all independent school children in England
0-2%	38	16.6%	2.6%
2-4%	32	23.1%	11.3%
4-6%	25	17.8%	13.4%
6-10%	29	25.3%	30.5%
>10%	29	17.3%	42.3%

Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 15 October 2024). Note: The second column, 'Number of Local Authorities', shows how many local authorities have each 'Proportion of children independently educated', we see that for 38 local authorities, 0-2% of school children attend independent schools. The third column, 'Proportion of all school children in England', shows what proportion of all school children are educated in those local authorities, we see that 16.6% of all school children are educated in the 38 local authorities where 0-2% of school children attend independent schools. The fourth column 'Proportion of all independent school children in England', shows what proportion of all school children *who attend independent schools* are educated in those local authorities, we see that just 2.6% of all school children *who attend independent schools* are educated in the 38 local authorities where 0-2% of school children attend independent schools.

1.3 Non-association and commercial group schools

There are some important groups within the independent sector to understand for clarity over what independent schools look like.

Association and non-association independent schools

One important distinction within the independent schools sector is one that has already featured in this chapter a number of times, which is that of schools within or outside of the Independent Schools Council (ISC). Those schools which are not members of the ISC are referred to as **non-association independent schools**.

The ISC represents 53 per cent of independent schools and 86 per cent of independent school pupils in England. These two numbers are so different as non-association independent schools are on average only a little over a sixth of the size of ISC schools (70 pupils versus 396 pupils).³⁷

ISC constituent and affiliated associations

Within the ISC, there are a number of school associations, within which there are those which constitute the ISC, and those which are simply affiliated with it. Many schools are members of multiple associations. Some of these associations entirely consist of independent schools, others include both independent and state schools.

Constituent: Girls' Schools Association (GSA), The Head's Conference (HMC), Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS), Independent Schools Association (ISA), The Society of Heads, Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools (AGBIS) and Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA).

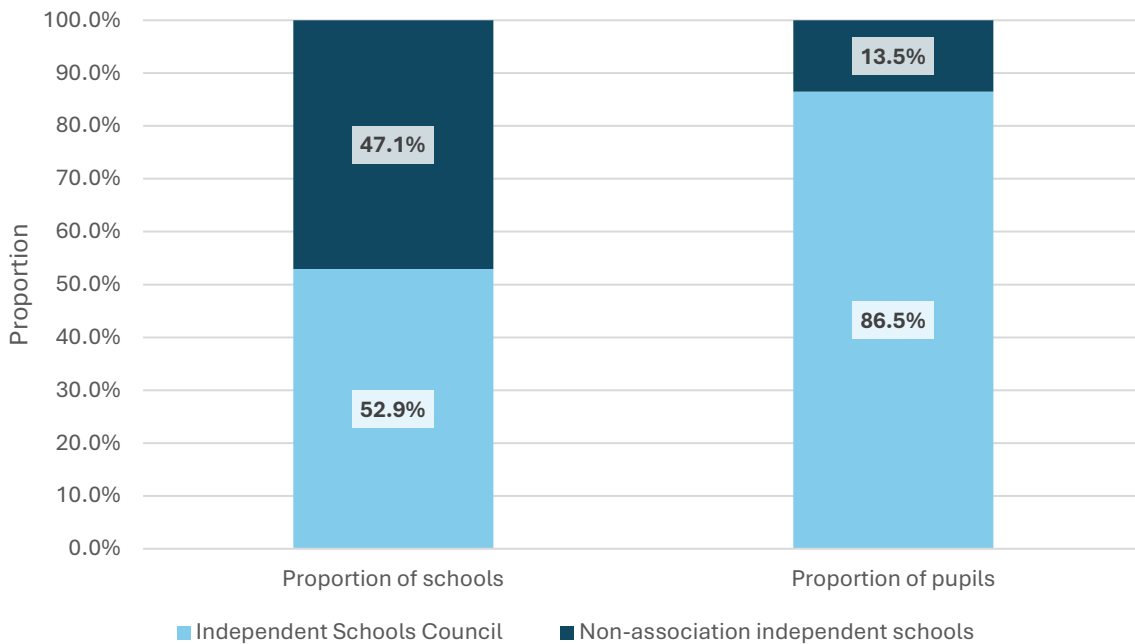
Affiliated: Boarding Schools' Association (BSA), Council of British International Schools (COBIS), Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Welsh Independent Schools Council (WISC).

Much of the evidence on the independent schools sector in the public domain only refers to ISC members, and it is not especially uncommon for commentators to consider the independent schools sector to be synonymous with the ISC.³⁸ This is incorrect.

³⁷ The 396-pupil average uses the Department for Education *Get Information About Schools* data. Using *ISC Annual Census 2024* data this figure is 383 pupils, see Appendix 1 for further explanation.

³⁸ Examples include: *Independent School Parents*. 'Autumn Guide to Independent Schools 2023'. Available at: <https://www.independentschoolparent.com/latest-issue/schools-guide/> (Accessed: 15 October 2024). Sibieta, L. (2023) *Tax, private school fees and state school spending*. IFS. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/IFS-Report-R263-Tax-private-school-fees-and-state-school-spending.pdf> (Accessed: 4 March 2024), and F. Green & D. Kynaston (2019) *Engines of Privilege: Britain's Private School Problem*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Figure 1.5: Independent Schools Council and non-association schools, proportion of schools and pupils, England, 2024/25



Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> for both non-association and Independent Schools Council. (Accessed: 6 September 2024). See Appendix 1 for methodology.

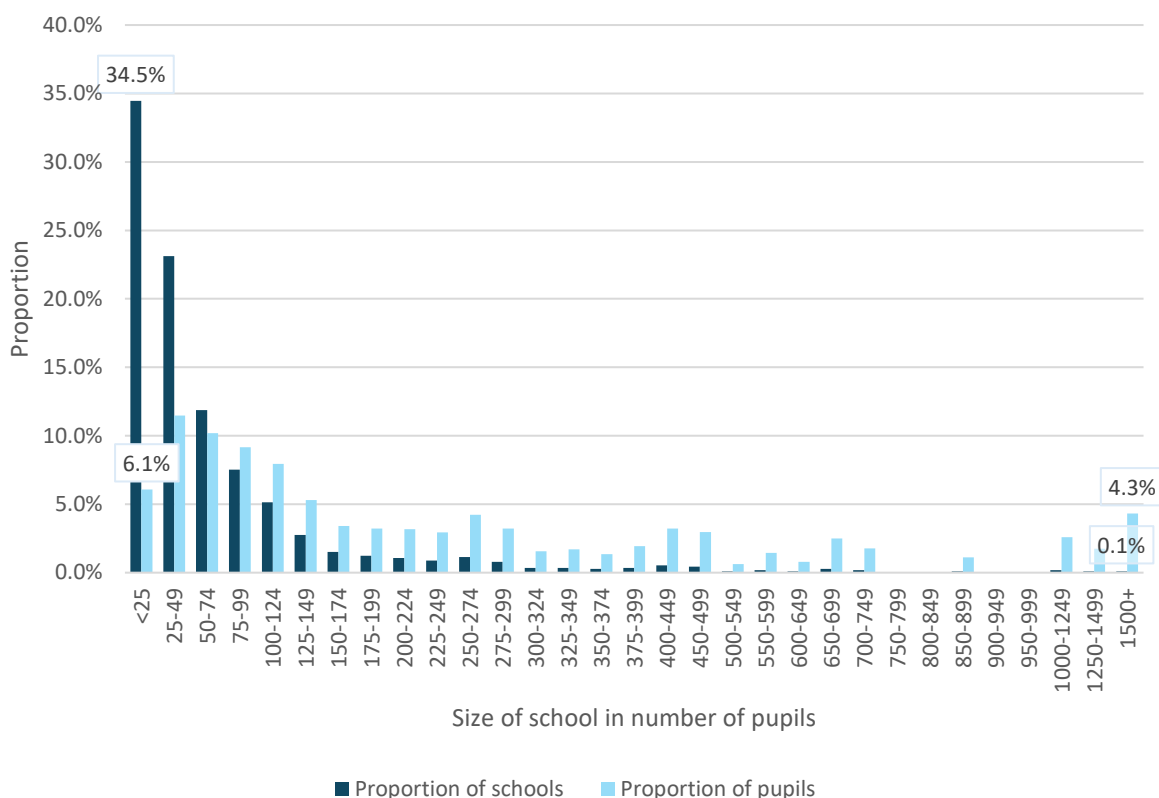
There are five important observations to highlight about non-association independent schools: they are very small, a majority are special schools, many are religious (notably Jewish and Muslim schools), they generally opened more recently and a disproportionate number perform poorly at Ofsted inspections.

Size

Of the 1,149 non-association independent schools in our dataset, 58 per cent of the schools have fewer than 50 pupils and 389 schools (34 per cent) have fewer than 25 pupils. Just 204, or 18 per cent, of non-association independent schools have 100 or more pupils.

Figure 1.6 illustrates this result. We can see looking at the dark blue bars, which show the number of schools, that the majority of these types of independent schools are extremely small. However, we can see from the light blue bars, which illustrates the number of pupils, that non-association independent school pupils are fairly spread across school sizes, with 17 per cent of pupils (13,544) at the 14 largest schools (over 500 pupils), and 8.5 per cent of these at the four very large schools (over 1,000 pupils).

Figure 1.6: Proportion of schools and pupils by size of non-association independent schools



Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).

Special schools and specialist schools

The DfE assess non-association independent schools by three main groups: non-association independent special schools, non-association independent faith schools, and other non-association independent schools.

Special schools make up over half (63 per cent) of non-association independent schools, although just 30 per cent of pupils as they are, on average, three quarters smaller than other non-association independent schools. A large majority of non-association independent special schools have under 50 pupils and the average number of pupils is just 33.

Of non-association independent school pupils, 40 per cent have SEND. Of these, 25,642 (32 per cent of all non-association independent school pupils) have SEND or EHCP, and 6,719 (8 per cent) do not. Pupils with an EHCP can receive public funding at an independent school, especially if it is determined that their state-funded school cannot meet their needs.

Special schools are defined by government as schools that specifically cater to children with special educational needs. Special schools can further specialise into one of four areas of special educational needs.³⁹

Specialist schools are not an officially defined group in the UK, although they are in other countries such as New Zealand.⁴⁰ These are schools which offer a defined and distinct education to their students. Most obviously, we can consider orthodox (used loosely) Jewish and Muslim schools and those with a specialist educational philosophy such as Montessori or Steiner schools, as well as performing arts schools. This term is used throughout this report and features in the recommendations.

Religious character

This section excludes non-association independent special schools, as Ofsted recommend.

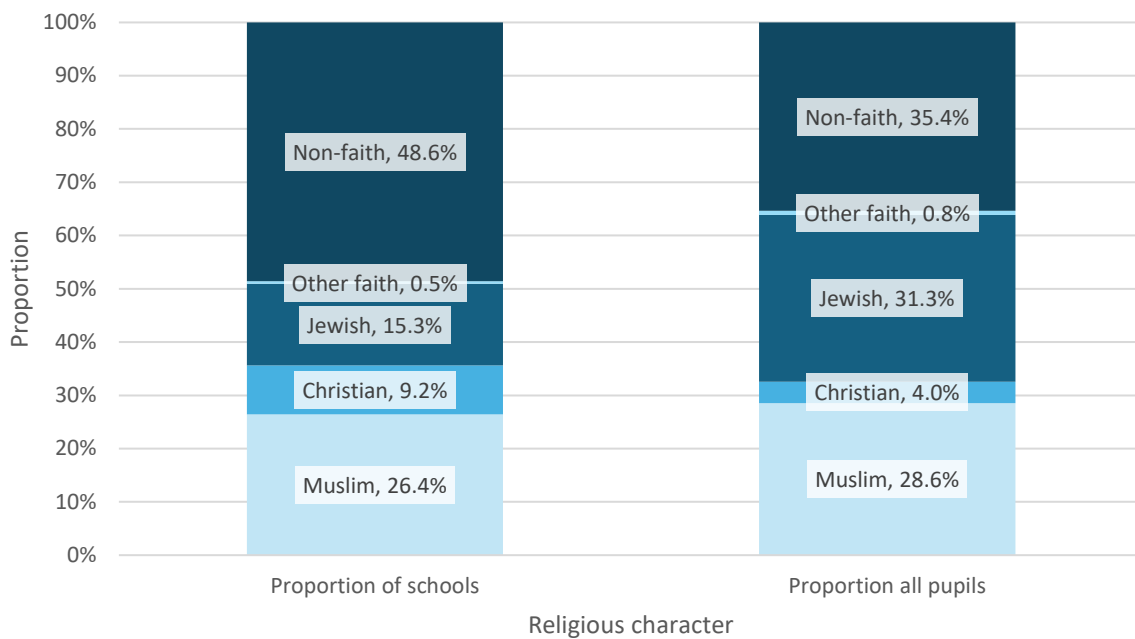
Almost half of non-association independent schools are non-faith schools, accounting for 49 per cent of non-association independent schools. These schools, however, are slightly smaller than faith schools, and so only account for 35 per cent of pupils.

There are substantial differences in average school size across different non-association independent faith schools. The largest group by schools is that of Muslim schools, accounting for over a quarter of non-association independent schools and 29 per cent of pupils, with an average size of 142 pupils. Christian schools account for nearly a tenth of schools, but just four per cent of pupils as they have an average school size of just 57 pupils. Jewish schools, on the other hand, account for 15 per cent of schools and 31 per cent of pupils as their pupil size is over four times as large, with an average of 267 pupils at each school.

³⁹ UK Government. *Types of school*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school> (Accessed: 5 January 2024).

⁴⁰ Live and Work New Zealand. *The school system*. Available at: <https://www.live-work.immigration.govt.nz/live-in-new-zealand/education-and-schooling/the-school-system> (Accessed: 15 October 2024).

Figure 1.7: Non-association independent schools and pupils by religious character



Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 2 October 2023).

Characteristics of non-association independent schools: Age of school

Non-association independent schools mostly opened very recently – 82 per cent opened since 2000.

Thirty-three per cent opened in the 2010s, and a further 31 per cent opened since the beginning of 2020 – admittedly these schools are mostly very small. Just three of the 1,157 non-association independent schools, 0.3 per cent, opened before 1950.

The older non-association independent schools are larger on average, with over half of pupils at the oldest quarter of schools.

Inspection performance

The tables below illustrate that non-association independent schools, in particular those with a religious character, perform significantly worse than state schools in Ofsted inspections. This inspection performance is reported according to the old Ofsted one-word grades, which have been discontinued.

Table 1.4: Proportion of non-association independent schools and pupils by type of provision and Ofsted inspection performance, England, most recent inspections as at July 2024⁴¹

Type of provision	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
Independent special school	12%	75%	11%	3%
Other independent school	10%	67%	12%	10%
All non-association independent schools	10%	71%	13%	6%
All state-funded schools in England	15%	75%	8%	2%

Source: Ofsted (2024) *Non-association independent schools inspection and outcomes in England: July 2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/non-association-independent-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-management-information> (Accessed: 10 September 2024). Ofsted (2024), *State-funded schools inspection and outcomes in England: December 2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2023/main-findings-state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2023#inspections-between-1-september-2023-and-31-december-2023> (Accessed: 10 September 2024).

Non-association independent schools generally perform worse in Ofsted inspections than state schools. Within non-association independent schools, special schools perform better in Ofsted inspections than other schools, although not compared with state-funded special schools.⁴²

Only 106 of the 1,149 non-association independent schools are categorised as selective.⁴³

Table 1.5: Proportion of non-association independent schools and pupils by religious character and Ofsted inspection performance, England, most recent inspections as at July 2024

Religious character	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
Christian	16%	68%	11%	5%
Jewish	0%	27%	46%	27%
Muslim	4%	78%	11%	7%
Non-faith	10%	67%	12%	10%
Other faith	0%	100%	0%	0%

Source: Ofsted (2024) *Non-association independent schools inspection and outcomes in England: July 2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/non-association-independent-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-management-information> (Accessed: 10 September 2024).

⁴¹ The data for state-funded schools in this table (bottom row) is from up to December 2023.

⁴² Ofsted (2022) *State-funded schools inspection and outcomes in England: August 2022*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-august-2022> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁴³ See Appendix 1.

Non-association independent Jewish schools perform particularly poorly in Ofsted inspections, with 73 per cent of schools achieving ‘Requires improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’, compared to 10 per cent of all state-funded schools in England. Other non-association independent faith schools perform similarly to other non-association independent schools, with Christian schools performing slightly better.

This presents a key dilemma of specialist schools that is evident throughout the report. Their existence provides clear and important benefit to the schooling ecosystem in terms of cultural, religious and educational diversity and freedom to innovate in education. It also provides an important element of choice to parents to send their children to schools appropriate to them.

On the other hand, it presents a significant educational and cultural challenge to the country, and those who attend these schools can be left poorly educated and poorly integrated with wider society. This raises a question as to whether these schools would be best situated in the independent sector, the state sector, or some sort of intermediary category.

Commercial school groups

Another important category in the independent schools sector is schools which are members of commercial school groups. This section analyses a sample of these schools.

Although most independent schools are charities, there are an estimated 300 to 400 for-profit independent schools in the sector. These schools do not have charitable status, although they did still have a VAT exemption alongside charitable independent schools until January 2025. These schools are highly concentrated in London and are often in commercial school groups. This is a relatively new phenomenon; commercial groups of independent schools were extremely uncommon in England before 2000, although there was a global market.

Our analysis focuses on eight of the largest commercial groups in England: Alpha Schools,⁴⁴ Alpha Plus Group,⁴⁵ Bellevue,⁴⁶ Chatsworth Schools,⁴⁷ Cognita,⁴⁸ Dukes Education,⁴⁹ Forfar,⁵⁰ and Inspired Learning.⁵¹ As of September 2024, together these groups account for 138 independent schools in England as recognised by the DfE’s Get Information About Schools (GIAS) portal. We will consider this group as ‘major commercial group schools’. With the exception of four schools, these schools are not in our non-association independent schools

⁴⁴ Alpha Schools. Available at: <https://www.alphaschools.co.uk/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁴⁵ Inspired. *Alpha Plus Group Joins Inspired Education*. Available at: <https://www.inspirededu.com/alpha-plus-group> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁴⁶ Bellevue. Available at: <https://blvue.com/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁴⁷ Chatsworth Schools. Available at: <https://chatsworthschools.com/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁴⁸ Cognita. Available at: <https://www.cognita.com/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁴⁹ Dukes Education. Available at: <https://dukeseducation.com/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁵⁰ Forfar Education. Available at: <https://www.forfareducation.co.uk/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁵¹ Inspired Learning Group. Available at: <https://www.inspirelearninggroup.co.uk/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

analysis, as they are inspected by the ISI, not by Ofsted. This does not necessarily mean that they are part of the ISC, and many are not.

Pupil numbers

Major commercial group schools educate a combined 32,893 pupils, with a mean pupil headcount of 238 and a median of 207. Just 14 of the schools have under 100 pupils and, on the other end, just two have over 700 pupils.

Sex of entry

Of the 32,893 pupils at major commercial group schools, 18,673 (56.8 per cent) are boys and 14,220 (43.2 per cent) are girls. This is largely because there are nine boys' schools and only four girls' schools within the 138 schools.

Age group provision

Table 1.6 shows that one distinctive characteristic of major commercial group schools is that they are over twice as likely to be junior schools, with almost two thirds of major commercial group schools educating children no older than age 13. Almost 90 per cent of major commercial group schools have some provision for children under the age of 11, compared to less than 75 per cent of all independent schools.

Table 1.6: Major commercial group schools, selected characteristics by age group provision, England (average across all independent schools in brackets), 2023

Type of school	Number of schools	Proportion of schools (all independent schools)	Number of pupils	Proportion of pupils (all independent schools)	Average pupil number (all independent schools)
Junior	88	63.8% (28.8%)	17,613	53.5% (23.6%)	200.1 (198.0)
Mixed-age	35	25.4% (45.0%)	10,966	33.3% (59.1%)	313.3 (318.1)
Senior	15	10.9% (26.1%)	4,314	13.1% (17.3%)	287.6 (160.7)

Source: Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 15 October 2024).

Religious character

Commercial group schools are more likely to be Christian schools – with 61 of the 138, or 44 per cent, having a Christian character or ethos, compared to 32 per cent of all independent schools. The Christian schools are slightly larger, so educate 47.7 per cent of major commercial group independent school children – admittedly this is lower than the proportion across the whole sector. There is only one major commercial group school of a religious character that is not Christian – it is 'Multi-faith'.

Geography

Major commercial group schools are highly concentrated in London and the South East: 38 (28 per cent) are in the South East, and 57 (41 per cent) are in London. No other region has

more than 12 major commercial group schools. Kensington and Chelsea, with nine, has the same number of major commercial group schools as the North East, the West Midlands and the East Midlands combined.

1.4 Summary

- There is no 'typical' independent school, but the closest that the sector gets is a school with under 300 pupils, that opened in the last 30 years, has a mixed-age cohort with some primary and some secondary provision, and is a coeducational day school with no religious character.
- It is true that seven per cent of school children are at independent schools, and that this figure has been stable over the long-term, but it also hides a more complex reality. In London, it exceeds 10 per cent; similarly, at sixth form, it is as much as 19 per cent. In the North East, at junior schools, or in some areas such as Nottinghamshire and Liverpool, it is under five per cent.
- There are a few important groups for analysis within the independent schools sector: ISC schools and non-association independent schools, of which both feature some commercial group schools as well. ISC schools are the dominant group within the sector, although commercial groups are rising quickly.
 - Commercial group schools have important legal differences from other independent schools, as they are run for profit and subject to various additional taxes that charitable independent schools are not, including in relation to business rates and gift aid.
 - Specialist schools – which many non-association schools are – provide clear positives and negatives of schooling in England. They present an opportunity in terms of diversity, freedom of expression and educational innovation; but they provide a challenge in terms of schooling standards and social cohesion.

Chapter 2.

What is the benefit of independent schools?

The second key pillar of understanding the independent schools sector is to ask the question: what are independent schools for? Outlining a positive vision for the independent schools sector requires an understanding of what independent schools focus on, what they are good at, and how they see their purpose. This chapter is not primarily focused on evaluating the performance of the independent schools sector, but on understanding how the sector perceives its benefit. This includes its benefit to pupils and their families as well as to the education system and society as a whole.

This chapter's discussion of the justification and benefits of the independent schools sector was particularly informed by our consultation with school leaders and educational experts from within and outside of the independent schools sector. A detailed explanation of this consultation is given in Appendix 2.

There are three overlapping but distinct ways to articulate how the sector perceives its benefit:

1. The first is the question of justification; why independent schools should continue to exist.

Some argue that independent schools should be fully integrated into the state schools sector, such that it is worth questioning the basis for having an independent schools sector in the future at all.

This justification was articulated in a multitude of ways, including according to the impact of the sector on the Treasury, on education, on culture, on Britain's international standing or on parental choice.

That said, all of these justifications originated in two strands. The first we call the 'rights' justification: that parents have a right to spend their money on their children's education. The second we call the 'social capital' justification: that independent schools are important to British society and form an important part of the country's social and cultural capital.

2. The second overarching way that the independent schools sector perceives its benefit is to those who use independent schools. This can be roughly understood as the 'private' benefit; the question of what is being purchased. This is by no means all of the benefit of independent schools but it is one important part.

The reasons a parent might send their child to an independent school can be categorised into two groups: reasons why it will improve their experience of schooling and reasons why it will improve their educational outcomes. These two are highly compatible with one another – quality of school experience and ultimate performance intuitively correlate closely – but they are discrete ways of looking at what the independent schools sector offers to those who choose to use it.

We can take a closed definition of schooling outcomes here, looking specifically at measured performance. This is not to say that the whole value of an education can be measured using only academic performance, but to isolate the direct educational *investment* effect: the investment of parental capital into better measured outcomes for their children. This sort of investment decision is also clear in private tutoring and other services parents may purchase.

Within schooling experience, we particularly look at how the independent schools sector offers a level of breadth, tailoring and character to those who purchase it.

3. The third, and by far broadest, way that independent schools perceive their benefit is that they are beneficial to society; that they provide public benefit. This closely mirrors the social capital justification but takes it further, articulating specific channels of social benefit.

This is seen in terms of outcomes, or performance, but also through the joint lens of driving standards and supporting key industries such as medicine and law. Next, related to this, is the economic contribution of the sector and the value of the independent schools sector's economic footprint, the outcomes of those independently educated and the tax savings of independently-funded school children. Important to this is its international reputation, as will be discussed.

The sector also articulates its social benefit through the spreading of educational resource and mutual learning by sharing practice; both part of the often dominant conversation of partnership work. The stock of assets within the sector provides a national benefit to education in the country of mutual learning and widening resource when these are shared – this is true of school facilities, but also of expertise at independent schools. In terms of expertise, an opportunity to share practice is seen through the provision of uncommon subjects for example spreading the expertise of a Classics teacher.

Another way in which the sector seeks to increase its social benefit is in its provision for disadvantaged children. The sector is catered by design to helping these children and has a long-standing tradition of doing so.

Finally is the topic of innovation, the vision that the independent sector can drive overall schooling standards through being a 'testing ground' for educational ideas, facilitated by independence.

The purpose and functions of education for everyone

As independent schools sit within the whole education system, it is worth setting their understanding of benefit in the wider context of how the wider purpose of education is viewed in England. This is of course contested and not tightly defined, but some areas of the education system provide important insight. This short section looks at the five leading contributions: Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Barnaby Lenon (Chair of the Independent Schools Council), Cambridge Assessment, National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and Ofsted.

These contributions were all submitted to the government in 2015/16 in response to a call for evidence to the 'Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry'.⁵²

Association of School and College Leaders

According to ASCL, 'the purpose of education is for the common good'.⁵³ This has four explicit and interrelated desired outcomes:

1. 'To learn to know'.

⁵² UK Parliament, *Written evidence: Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry*, Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2303/purpose-and-quality-of-education-in-england-inquiry/publications/written-evidence/> (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

⁵³ Ibid. PQE0146 from Association of School and College Leaders.

2. 'To learn to do'.
3. 'To learn to live together'.
4. 'To learn to be'.⁵⁴

These were also described as knowing 'the best of what has been thought or said', being able to 'use what we know', to develop 'civic character' and to develop 'moral and performance character'.⁵⁵

Barnaby Lenon

According to Barnaby Lenon's contribution:

*'The main purpose should be to transmit important human knowledge in a way which will ensure the student is able to recall a good proportion of it in the years after school.'*⁵⁶

Within this, he argued that 'where parents fail', schools should 'plug the gap' on 'essential life skills'. 'Enabling pupils to understand the world' he articulated as a 'particular function of history, geography, science and religious studies', whilst 'developing interests after school' he described as a 'function of all school subjects', and that through this they can make 'life worth living'.⁵⁷

Importantly, he also argued that producing a fairer society 'should not be the purpose, it should be an important side effect of educating all children well.' That 'if you make fairness a principal purpose you lose sight of the main game.'⁵⁸

In both ASCL and Lenon's contributions, although emphasis differs, we see similar themes. We see clearly a definition focused around developing knowledge, life skills, social and individual character, and, especially in Lenon's, a love of learning.

Cambridge Assessment

In their written evidence, Cambridge Assessment defined 'three main purposes'⁵⁹ of education:

1. 'It should develop an informed curiosity and a lasting passion for learning for its own sake, enabling children to acquire knowledge they would not have access to at home and that takes them beyond their own experience'. Such knowledge, they argued, is best conveyed through 'core "academic" subjects'.
2. 'It should develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to lead a fulfilled and productive life'.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ UK Parliament, *Written evidence: Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry*, Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2303/purpose-and-quality-of-education-in-england-inquiry/publications/written-evidence/> (Accessed: 4 July 2024) PQE0146 from Association of School and College Leaders.

⁵⁶ Ibid. PQE0003 from Mr Barnaby Lenon.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. PQE0081 from Cambridge Assessment.

3. 'It should develop attitudes that will be beneficial to the child and to society.'⁶⁰

This also covers very similar themes to ASCL and Lenon.

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

In their response, NFER asserted that:

*'[It] is important and healthy to debate the purposes of education. However, we do not believe this is a debate it is possible to resolve on objective, evidence-based grounds. Rather, it is a matter of ideological preference that goes beyond the remit of academic discussion, and belongs in the realm of democratic scrutiny.'*⁶¹

However, they did posit four alternatives on two dimensions: the 'traditional and progressive' and the 'intrinsic to the individual young people and the more extrinsic outworking of these'.

1. Their traditional and intrinsic purpose presented was 'academic achievement, including the acquisition of basic numeracy and literacy skills'.
2. Their progressive and intrinsic purpose presented was 'becoming well-rounded, creative, resilient and fulfilled individuals'.
3. Their traditional and extrinsic purpose presented was 'preparation for employment and contributing to economic growth'.
4. Their progressive and extrinsic purpose presented was 'becoming responsible citizens, playing an active role in civic society'.⁶²

Interestingly, NFER separated into different alternative purposes these ideas that ASCL, Lenon and Cambridge Assessment had put together.

Ofsted

In Ofsted's written response, they laid out four purposes which reflected their school inspection framework.

1. That 'broadly, a good education should play a vital role in preparing young people for the world of work and life in modern Britain.'
2. That 'during their time in education, children and young people should learn knowledge and skills that help make them well-rounded individuals, including an understanding of fundamental British values such as democracy, tolerance and the rule of law.'
3. The development of 'life skills', where education plays a role in 'the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of young people'.
4. That 'education is also a vital component in helping many learners to overcome social and economic disadvantages they may face.'⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. PQE0137 from National Foundation for Educational Research.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. PQE0031 from Ofsted.

Discussion

These five contributions share similar themes, around which we can form a broad understanding of the purpose and functions of education.

All five emphasise the importance of the **acquisition of knowledge**. Separate to this or through this, all five emphasised the importance of **life skills and having a greater understanding of the world**. Most explicitly in the contributions of Barnaby Lenon and Cambridge Assessment, although not contradicted by other contributions, was the importance of developing in students **a love of learning**. Also clear, albeit not unanimous across the responses, was the importance of nurturing **beneficial attitudes and character** in students to live fulfilled – or productive – adult lives.

It is also clear from these that an intended consequence of education, even if not necessarily a primary purpose of education, it is to grow and **enhance the economy**. Alongside this, it is clear that overcoming disadvantage and producing a fairer society is a consequence of a good education system, but it was contested whether this is itself a key purpose of education.

Any vision for the independent school sector and any conception of its benefit should broadly be set within the spirit of these observations.

2.1 Justifying the independent school sector

Section summary

The first way that the benefit of the independent school sector is articulated is through the justifications given for its existence. The Commission argues most justifications follow one or both of two strands: rights and social capital.

Rights justification: The state does not have the right to prohibit individuals from conducting any formal education that has no direct state oversight. Also, parents have a right – and are right – to spend money on improving their children’s lives, where they are able. This includes a right to paid-for schooling. To prohibit this is either inconsistent – given spending at other ages or in other contexts such as childcare or clubs – or is extreme – forbidding all spending from parents on their children.

Social capital justification: This view is that the independent school sector is extremely valuable to the country and should not be abolished. It is high quality, has a historical and cultural significance and is a large political and economic asset that should not be destroyed.

It is not uncommon for commentators and politicians to call for the abolition of the independent school sector. Consequently, it is a worthwhile exercise to articulate the main arguments for its continued existence.

‘Obviously the state is the latecomer historically to education compared to both private initiative and church initiative. The state has been in education for certainly 150 years or so, compared to what these schools have been doing for much longer than that.’ – Expert witness.

Independent schooling (schooling administered and financed independently of the state) existed for centuries before state schooling, with some free independent schooling and some paid-for. One might have expected that this sector would have been no longer viable once tax-funded state education became available to parents, as the central funding not enjoyed by independent schooling made it very hard to compete with the state offering.

This raises a legitimate question as to why the sector still exists.

‘I mean, fundamentally, they [independent schools] shouldn’t be needed, should they? I mean, there should be sufficiently good, high-quality state education provision, and those schools should have sufficient autonomy to run things their own way. It shouldn’t be necessary.’ – Interviewee from within sector.

In terms of the moral or political justifications of the sector, very few cite its viability, but of course the principal reason independent schools continue to exist is because they have remained viable – people have wanted them.

It's important here to briefly note the observation in Chapter 1.2, *How big is the independent school sector?*, that the sector has been consistently stable in size over the last half century.⁶⁴

The justifications below assume viability, and do not consider viability to be a sufficient political justification for the sector to continue to exist.

The 'rights' justification

The 'rights' justification has two perspectives; from a school perspective and from a parental perspective. The school perspective is that the state does not have the right to control education entirely.

'I don't think any of us want to live in a country where the state controls education entirely – that's definitely not in the tradition of British society' – Expert witness.

The notion that the state does not have the right to prohibit individuals from conducting education that has no direct state oversight is a compelling liberal principle.

The parental perspective is that parents have a right to independently educate their child. This has two strands. The first is that parents have a right to choose; to decide where and how their child is schooled. The second is that parents have a right to spend; to invest as much as they please (or at least *something*) directly in their child's schooling.

'An independent education is a right. I think that's where we have to start. Britain is in danger, as in so many other ways recently, of making itself feel less than a fully developed, civilised country if it starts legislating against the right of people to seek education where they want it. I'd start with that principle and philosophical point of view' – Expert witness.

This highlights two approaches around how to address the wider question of parents advantaging their own children within which independent education sits.

The first, which could be called the abolitionist argument, is that children should not receive an advantage over others because of their parents' affluence. The second is that good parenting necessitates doing as much as reasonably possible to improve one's children's childhood and life.

Both of these are legitimate, however the former – when applied to independent schooling – risks either inconsistency or an extreme position.

Most of parenting requires financial resource – and that which does not cost money often costs the indirect resource of time not spent working – and the investment of this resource into children is near universally approved. Much of this gives children an advantage.

⁶⁴ ISC annual censuses show no significant drops in pupil numbers at any point from 2007 to the present day. ISC. *ISC Annual Census*. Available at: <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/annual-census/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

The abolitionist argument here is inconsistent if it only prohibits independent schooling – why just this form of parental spending? Perhaps the clearest example of this is that very few criticise the investment into formal childcare, similarly – albeit less overwhelming – with private tutoring. Certainly with university tuition fees, where policy tends to revolve around removing barriers to parental investment, not prohibiting it. Independent schools present an inconsistency.

The abolitionist argument is extreme if it prohibits *all* supplementary parental spending on improving children’s lives: no books, no clubs or extra-curricular pursuits, no games.

This principle was extremely clearly supported in our polling, where we asked:

‘In principle, do you think it is right or wrong for parents to use their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools?’

Seventy-two per cent of the public thought that it is right, just 10 per cent thought that it is wrong. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Caveating the rights justification

A number of consultees did stress that the right not to be abolished did not free independent schools of an imperative to behave in a way that is ‘fair’ and ‘meritocratic’. In this sense, there is a systemic component that the rights justification risks overlooking.

This relates to whether the ‘choice’ argument is legitimate when independent schooling is a realistic choice to few parents due to its pricing structure.

‘I do think [choice] is one of the issues for the whole independent sector, because only some people have that choice. [...] where I feel uncomfortable [is] this narrative that the independent sector gives people the opportunity to not feel stuck, to have the choice. Some people don’t have that choice’ – Expert witness.

Some consultees suggested that for the independent school sector to justify itself on choice and parental rights, it must prioritise access in a way that it arguably has not done. That defending yourself on the grounds of choice necessitates offering it.

‘Everybody talks about seven per cent of children being in independent schools – that’s basically the same number it was at the end of the Second World War. There’s been essentially no long-term growth in the proportion of the population accessing independent schools, and if you compare that with the proportion of the population who have access to television or a motor car in the post-war period, you see how that’s exploded. [...] I think you can see a different direction for the independent sector if it had said [...] we’re trying to provide excellent, affordable, independent and independent-minded education to 30 or 40 per cent of the population and not seven per cent. We would have by now a very different view of the independent sector than the one which predominates in our country today’ – Expert witness.

This introduces a tension as to whether justification by choice is principally understood as the freedom to pay, or the freedom from being banned from paying. For the former, affordability becomes key to the pervasiveness of the justification, for the latter it does not. Both have merit, both were emphasised by consultees.

The ‘social capital’ justification

The second approach to justifying the existence of independent schools is that the sector is valuable and that, at the most basic level, it is unwise to abolish quality – certainly if the motivation for abolition *is* the high quality.

Social capital: Driving standards

This approach tends to revolve around three areas where the sector provides social capital. The first is that the sector drives up standards in education through good performance, collaboration, innovation and providing examples of excellent practice.

‘Is the sector thriving? I would say, in many ways, yes. I think the standard and quality of what’s on offer in the independent sector is very high, and arguably, depending on how you look at it, higher than ever before. I think one of the advantages of the sector for the country and the wider education system is that it is able to set a standard of attainment, of pastoral care and of expectations – especially the more academic institutions – which lies outside the ability of the state to erode through grade inflation or through lowering expectations. Partnership also does seem to be thriving in many institutions...’ – Expert witness.

This position tends to argue that at no cost to the state (indeed at a saving to the state in terms of children not using the state provision) independent schools perform extremely well and that this – as well as directly improving aggregate educational standards – provides an example to follow and a place to try different educational approaches.

Social capital: Culturally significant

The second is that the sector has a historical and cultural significance in England that should be preserved as part of Britain’s ‘cultural heritage’. We first see cultural significance in how some historical and culturally significant areas of our economy depend on education principally provided in the independent school sector.

‘Independent schools prop up key subjects – modern languages rely very much on the existence of independent schools, the number of people who study medicine at university who went to independent schools is incredibly high, so the NHS relies on the independent sector’ – Expert witness.

We also see cultural significance in how independent schools are the nucleus of the national provision of many subjects that tend not to be studied – or at least not prioritised – at state schools.

‘It’s really important that [independent schools’] contribution to our cultural life is noted and recognised. Again, I think there are lots of our schools doing fantastic work with other local schools where access to music A-Level or Greek or whatever it happens to be is made available to other children in the local area who go to schools where that wouldn’t be offered’ – Expert witness.

We thirdly see cultural significance in how the independent sector is the home to a large number of religious schools that have an autonomy in the independent sector that they would not have in the state system, advancing England’s cultural and religious diversity and freedom.

Social capital: Political and economic asset

The third point is that the sector provides significant economic and political benefits to England. The first strand of this is simply that the sector has a significant economic footprint of which much would be lost. This argument tends to be that independent schools significantly increase aggregate national investment into education by utilising parental income, totalling more than what the state would spend if those children were in the state sector.

The second strand of this third point is that as global – as well as domestic – leaders in schooling, independent schools enhance England’s reputation and ‘soft power’.

‘Soft power is not something we should lightly abandon, because we haven’t got any hard power. We haven’t had any since pretty much 1918. I mean, bizarrely, there are 200-and-something odd countries in the world, and you could probably approach 190 of them and say, you can have the British independent education system, and they would bite your hand off. Yet we seem to be attempting to destroy it for some reason, and I’m not quite sure why. Culturally, as a country, we are diffident about how good it is; we socially appear a bit ashamed about it’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

The third strand of this – very similar to the second – is that through its international reputation, the sector is an important economic and cultural export. This is also true at an attendance level with 10 per cent of ISC students being non-British.⁶⁵

‘We work [with students from] South America, America, Switzerland, lots from the Far East – and it’s quite hard to overstate, particularly for people who are unfamiliar with the sector, just how popular and impressive it is. I mean, I think it punches way above its weight across the world. And if you’re a discerning family, particularly from an elite or aspiring elite background, really anywhere in the world, you want your kids to go to a British independent school, probably a boarding school’ – Expert witness.

⁶⁵ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024)

Many consultees likened calls to abolish independent schools to the notion of calling to abolish our top universities: that if not everyone can receive the benefits of an excellent institution, it is not fair if anyone does. In other words, there is often an idea of equality achieved through the elimination of advantage, not the elimination of disadvantage.

Summary

These two approaches cover the same ground in parts. They both relate to innovation; in terms of providing choice and differentiation to parents and in terms of dynamic efficiency and driving educational standards. They also both relate to breadth in a similar sense; enriching our culture through the range in what is studied at schools, but also allowing different educational approaches to be offered to parents.

Two insights stand out from this understanding of justifying the independent schools sector.

First, and the most important overlap between the two justifications, is the idea of whether the sector causes aggregate benefit or harm to state education in Britain. A criticism that this section does not address is the accusation of a 'brain drain'.

Second is that parental choice (or 'freedom', or 'agency') is only as effective a defence as it is a reality; enough parents need to have a choice as to whether they educate their children independently or through the state, for the argument of choice to compel.

Of course, the argument of 'rights' can be maintained quite distinctly from affordability, but the argument of 'choice' cannot be.

Many of these compelling arguments are used to outline the independent school sector's benefits.

2.2 The benefit of independent schools to parents and pupils

Section summary

The second way independent schools articulate their benefit is in what benefit they provide to those who are independently educated: their benefit to their recipients. This benefit is typically articulated in two overlapping strands: schooling outcomes (as an investment) and schooling experience (as consumption).

Schooling outcomes: Independent schooling is extremely effective at providing its students with excellent academic outcomes and at helping them obtain top university places. These outcomes are materially beneficial in terms of improved expected future career prospects.

Schooling experience: Independent schooling offers an impressively holistic and enriching schooling experience. Pupils get to experience a substantial breadth in what is offered, and an education tailored to them where their passions and skills are identified and nurtured. This experience is beneficial in terms of helping pupils lead fulfilled future adult lives.

These two traditions illustrate, to some extent, NFER's commentary on how the purposes of education differ according to ideological preference.⁶⁶

Schooling outcomes (investment)

Many parents see independent schooling as an investment into their child. Parents are partially paying for the outcomes for their child at the end of their schooling. The analysis presented in Chapter 5.1 evaluates the evidence for this idea, whilst this section examines its credibility as part of how the sector sells itself.

In our survey of school leaders, when asked, 'Would you say that your school has a distinctive and defined ethos/character?', the most common word used by schools was 'academic', appearing 43 per cent more times than any other word. It was also 86 per cent more likely than any other word to be the first word of a schools' description of their 'distinctive and defined ethos'.⁶⁷

The consultation suggested that the most common selling point from a school's perspective was exceptional academic standards. The reason for this seemed to predominantly be its impact on university prospects. This is also seen in the two doublings mentioned in Chapter 1.2 – with the proportion independently educated doubling from primary to secondary, and then again from secondary to sixth-form.

'From the 70s onwards, [the independent sector] becomes much more academic as success was achieved less by where you had been to school and access to the establishment and was much more on where you'd gone to university and what

⁶⁶ UK Parliament, *Written evidence: Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry*, Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2303/purpose-and-quality-of-education-in-england-inquiry/publications/written-evidence/> (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

⁶⁷ Commission consultation, see Appendix 2.

degree you got. As that's become more important, the schools have got much better at providing something that maximises pupils' chances of getting into those universities' – Interviewee from within the sector.

The notion of purchasing exceptional academic performance was cynically associated with a desire to simply purchase a place at one of 'the top' universities by a number of consultees.

'All they care about is their children getting to Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton and Yale, and as long as that school is going to give them a route to the top, that's what they care about' – Expert witness.

Admittedly, as outlined in Chapter 1.1, a number of consultees highlighted that this conception does not apply well to primary (prep) schools.

'At a prep level it's really not about "I want my child to be a part of the political elite." It is about experience, but quite human-level experiencing: "my child is safe; my child is noticed; my child can thrive"' – Interviewee from within the sector.

Some consultees also considered this to be an area of decreasing importance.

'I would say I've probably spent the last 15 or 17 years, maybe longer, working in independent schools and before that I worked in the state sector, and I would say that to begin with a lot of my conversations with parents were all about the academic. Now, they start far more about the pastoral and the encompassing support of a pupil, and the academics come later' – Expert witness.

The evidence from our polling in Chapter 3 suggests that the standard of education remains the prevailing deciding factor for parents choosing an independent education, with 'I wanted my child to receive the highest possible standard of education' chosen as the most important reason by 36 per cent, double any other statement and far more than SEND support (12 per cent) or pastoral care (10 per cent).⁶⁸

The future of independent schooling as an investment

A note of caution on the characterisation of independent schools as an investment was that, in reality, the promise of an elite university place is increasingly difficult for independent schools to guarantee, with the suggestion that this trend may continue into the future.

'I think the train crash that's coming which no one's really talking about is the reversal in policy at Oxbridge against these [independent] schools, [...] because we all know one of the reasons parents are paying is they are trying to buy the right sorts of universities and therefore the right sorts of jobs' – Expert witness.

'If it turned out that access to university in general was much more restricted for pupils from independent schools than it currently is, I suspect that would have quite a

⁶⁸ Deltapoll survey of 1,673 English parents, see Appendix 3.

big impact on parental behaviour – certainly for secondary school’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

Universities and independent schools are different institutions and there is much more that independent schools offer. However, with respect to this dimension, this is an important trend to note as it impacts secondary independent schools academic offering. It is another theme returned to in Chapter 5.1.

Schooling experience (consumption)

Much of the value of schooling is in the experience of schooling as well as the measured outcomes a student receives. Indeed, most educators would say that even within the specific aim of imparting knowledge that teaching a love of learning, intellectual curiosity, discipline, confidence and good speaking skills are all of similar importance to grades in examinations. Generally, the mechanisms cited for this are breadth – in terms of enabling pupils to have had wide-ranging experiences – and tailoring – in terms of their strengths being identified and nurtured.

Breadth

Many consultees from the sector noted how important schools consider a ‘holistic’ education to be. Indeed, the second most common word used by schools to describe their ethos in the survey was ‘holistic’.⁶⁹

‘They are all essentially selling the same thing. They may be slightly more selective and academically focused, or slightly less, but in all honesty, you won’t find one where a dedication to a holistic education isn’t the key note. That should be enjoyed by all children’ – Expert witness.

‘Holistic’ was generally defined by a conviction that children need to be enriched broadly over their schooling in order to develop as complete human beings, and to be exposed to a range of activities and pursuits. This contrasted with the ‘grade factory’ stereotype.

Many consultees highlighted the importance of sport, and suggested that independent schools have particularly good sports provision. Many more consultees highlighted the importance of performing arts, of music, poetry, theatre, and dancing. A number also highlighted the importance of languages, both modern and ancient.

These were discussed as enhancing the education of children, and as a valuable provision of the independent sector to those who attend.

‘The child’s school experience can be enhanced by the provision of cultural activities in which to engage – your singing, your dancing, your drama, your art. This is also what can be shared across the sectors’ – Expert witness.

⁶⁹ See Appendix 2.

From a viability perspective, this student experience was cited as extremely important to parents.

‘People are buying what they believe to be a world-class education, and certainly with the more expensive schools, an education it would just be impossible to replicate in the state sector in terms of sport, music, Saturday programmes, chapels and professional choirs and so on’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

‘Schools have become much more focused now on high-quality experience [...] that’s reflected what parents have wanted.’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

The consequence of prioritising breadth

Almost all consultees commended the independent school sector’s ability to provide and value breadth in schooling.

‘I think the thing [independent schools] cherish more than the state sector is the extra-curricular activities. I think they’re excellent at that. And it’s not just that they do them; they value them. And there’s a difference, a huge difference. For every good orchestra or good drama group you show me in the independent sector, I will show you one in the state sector. The state system at the moment just doesn’t value it as much. It doesn’t give it time, it doesn’t give it money, no one makes speeches about it, because we do phonics all the time’ – Parliamentarian.

However, there was criticism of breadth being the top priority of schools. First, it was highlighted that the provision of breadth in schooling has arguably helped induce a ‘facilities arms race’ in the independent school sector, where independent schools compete to have more extravagant facilities – a concept that featured extensively in the consultation and one that was referred to as a ‘genuine fact as well as a cliché’.

Here, we acknowledge that seeing independent schooling as a *consumption good* always risks seeing independent schooling as a *luxury good*. This can lead to an erosion of parental choice as the sector becomes increasingly unaffordable and ‘exclusive’. It can also erode the sector’s ability to drive standards as the benefit of high-quality replicable practice depends on schools being cost efficient enough to be followed by the state schools sector.

On this trend of widening good practice, a number of consultees asserted the imperative to spread this breadth across the education system. This is returned to when considering the benefit of independent schools to education, society and the economy.

Tailoring

Another key element of schooling experience is a tailored education, and the related focus on good pastoral care. Consistently in the consultation, independent schools were described as being excellent at catering to the needs of individual children. This educational philosophy can address some forms of acute disadvantage very effectively.

The philosophical preference for a focus on the ‘whole child’ is often a question of attention and care as much as it is a question of wide-reaching experiences.

‘If you think of a child who has mild SEN or doesn’t quite meet the threshold for an EHCP – we often see that those children will benefit from the smaller class sizes and expert help that they can get in our schools, whereas they may struggle in the maintained class. With the best will in the world, when you’ve got 30 children and very, very tight resourcing, it’s hard to cater for their individual needs’ – Expert witness.

Some consultees argued that the best state schools do not have an approach of individualised attention and instead prioritise whole-class teaching, arguing that individualised schooling is not effective with large classes.

Individualised attention is expensive and depends on small classes, but it facilitates excellent provision for looked-after children and vulnerable children, especially those with childhood trauma.⁷⁰ This is an extremely important note in understanding both the ‘private’ and ‘public’ benefit of the independent school sector.

Neurodivergence

Several consultees stressed that independent schools, in part attributed to smaller class sizes, are often chosen by parents as their children are neurodivergent or are considered to have ‘an undiagnosed SEN’ – alongside the provision that exists for children with SEND. That these parents are therefore willing to pay a large premium in order to get their children the support that they need.

‘Often, this is the second school their child attends because the first school led to damage in some way. I’m not blaming the school, but that child may well have been bullied or have a special need and they disappeared within their school. The parent could definitely see, “my child – whom I love and whom my whole life is devoted to – is at risk, what can I do about that?” Well, at the moment, it’s within their power to make a big gesture, spend tens of thousands of pounds of income – £15,000 being the average fee – of taxed income, so what’s that? Twenty-five grand of income, fixing that problem’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

This element received much comment. The provision of choice to parents and of a safe environment for children was recognised as a key part of what schools sell to parents. It featured much less in our polling, however, than it did in our consultation, as discussed in Chapter 3.

⁷⁰ Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation and the Department for Education. “Broadening Educational Pathways” for looked-after and vulnerable children. Available at: https://idpe.org.uk/idpe/uploads/News%20pages/FAQs%20Independent%20school%20places%20for%20LAC_CIN_HMC%20schools.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024)

Specialist schooling and character

Tailoring was also discussed through the lens of specialist schools. Some examples of specialist schools include Jewish or Muslim schools or Montessori or Steiner schools. Also, special schools are a defined group of independent schools (58 per cent of non-association independent schools)⁷¹ that cater specifically to children with SEND.

As well as an example of tailored educational offering in the independent sector, specialist schooling is a key component of having an independent sector that provides choice to parents and an ability to educate their child in the way they deem most appropriate. It is also, perhaps counterintuitively, a component of the breadth of provision, as schools with different specific focuses enhance the range of schooling in the independent sector.

Related to specialisation, the final theme is ‘character’. Principally, this relates to schools offering something that is *distinctive*. This most obviously manifests itself in religious character, but there are other trends in this space within the independent sector.

Schools with religious character form around half of the independent sector.⁷² Much as they may be conceived as one group, they vary massively in size, style and approach.

In such a religiously diverse country – where 63 per cent in England and Wales describe themselves as religious and where six different global religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Judaism) have over a quarter of a million followers each⁷³ – an independent school system which allows parents to have choice over the religious ethos of their child’s schooling was considered very important by consultees.

This dimension of choice was raised by consultees as especially important, as it relates to religious freedom and therefore protected rights. Through this it presents an area where independent schooling can contribute to freedom of religion or belief across Britain.

‘I think that more protection for individual philosophies or religious communities – such as faith schools and faith communities – to pursue an education which is aligned with their own traditions and faiths [would be commendable]. So, for example, thinking about how the Equality Act applies to individual faith schools would be good for the sector because it would bring in more experimentation and protection for difference’ – Expert witness.

As Chapter 1 showed, however, independent faith schools should be viewed with some degree of caution, considering their poor performance on inspection. The appropriate

⁷¹ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

⁷² Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

⁷³ Roskams, M. (2022) *Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

balancing of the protection of religious freedom faith schools provided and the responsibility to ensure school standards across the educational landscape is a difficult balance to strike.

Modern manifestations

There was also discussion from many consultees on differing notions of the 'development of character' at independent schools. This, inherited from the likes of Thomas Arnold, was either orientated around an ethos of 'public service' and the idea that independent schools should foster a sense of responsibility in its pupils that have received a privileged upbringing,⁷⁴ or through a sense of fighting for justice, particularly with regard to race, sex and gender. This was commended by many consultees but criticised by some on two grounds. The first being that it ignored 'socioeconomic inequality', the dimension whereby independently educated children are typically advantaged; the second being the accusation of laundering privilege. The implication of the latter suggests that the ethos of some schools is 'I have privilege, and I am going to use that privilege to make myself feel better about being privileged', as one consultee put it.

It seemed clear that, irrespective of its merits or demerits, the inclination toward social justice at independent schools forms a consistent part of the 'schooling experience' that parents are investing in.

⁷⁴ Turner, D. (2015) *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School*.

2.3 The benefit of independent schools to education, society and the economy

Section summary

The public benefit of independent schools is questioned more widely than their benefit to parents and pupils, and this was reflected in the consultation. The third section of this chapter addresses this articulation of the sector's success: its wider benefit to society. This argument tends to revolve around five axes:

Performance: Through the independent sector's performance, it drives national educational standards, fills highly skilled professions and ensures excellence in areas such as sport and performing arts.

Economic contribution: The independent sector is a large economic asset to the country. It has a large economic footprint, including as an export industry, and has an enviable international standing as global leaders in schooling.

Spreading resource: Independent schools generate and then share significant educational resource that this country otherwise would not have, through increasing private investment in education and then partnering to share this resource.

Transforming disadvantage: Independent schools – in particular through (generally) longer hours and smaller classes – maintain a particular excellence at providing transformational education to the most disadvantaged children. Through this, they can act as agents of social mobility for these children.

Innovation: Independent schools have the freedom to pursue different ideas and philosophies in order to improve educational standards and approaches across the country.

Chapters 3 to 6 develop the evidence and perceptions around this question, while this chapter looks to understand how the sector perceives its public benefit. It is not the evaluation of the merits of these claims but the principles behind them that forms the main focus in this section, although of course some of the evidence is discussed.

Performance

As already established, independent schools focus on offering education of a high academic quality. This focus on high standards can provide a social benefit through filling high skilled professions and driving high standards across all schooling in terms of replicating of practice. The performance of the sector is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.2 – this section looks at the importance of this performance to the wider education system.

Some consultees also highlighted the importance of having some extremely well-educated young adults within an economy. This mirrored the cultural significance argument in Chapter 2.1 *Justifying the independent schools sector*: the argument that many key professions in our

economy have significant dependence on the independent sector – especially medicine and law.

*‘We would not have a very significant number of the professions which rely on people with outstanding achievement at 18 without the independent sector. We can say that’s a failure of the system and I agree, it’s a failure of the system. But frankly, at the moment, the people getting A*s in physics and chemistry are widely disproportionately in the independent sector, followed by grammar schools, followed by certain very good London state schools, and then essentially everything else is trailing in the wake’ – Expert witness.*

Witnesses also made a wider aspiration point about the importance of top schools to the education system.

‘I think we kind of need people with high educational aspirations in this country, and I think that the problem with the state sector is too often it’s a kind of, not necessarily lowest common denominator, but it’s sort of saying, “Get three Cs at A-Level and you’ll be fine.” It’s not stretching people. We need neurosurgeons and barristers and all sorts of other wonderful professions and I think we’re wasting talent by having a levelling agenda’ – Expert witness.

There was also the assertion that the independent sector’s performance in areas such as music, theatre, and sport are very important to Britain’s economy and international standing.

Driving standards in all-girls education

All-girls schools have proven instrumental in breaking down barriers, which is essential for girls’ empowerment and skill-building. All-girls schools create an environment where girls can reach their full potential. They actively encourage girls to explore STEM subjects, foster confidence, encourage participation in physical education and sports, and promote girls’ involvement in leadership roles. This supportive setting enables girls to excel across a wide range of fields, fostering their growth and ambition.

Despite these benefits, single-sex education has seen a decline over the past decade, dropping from 25 per cent of independent schools in 2013 to 19 per cent in 2023 within the ISC. The Girls’ Day School Trust (GDST) has pioneered efforts to promote all-girls educational environments, offering a vital choice for families seeking a girls-only education. Though most single-sex schools in the UK are within the independent, fee-paying sector, approximately 12 per cent of state-funded schools remain single-sex, including 226 girls’ and 184 boys’ schools out of a total of 2,400 secondary schools.

All-girls schools provide spaces that empower young women to thrive academically, socially, and professionally. The ability of independent schools to better reflect the needs of girls is positively impactful on girls’ education.

Criticism

Although many affirmed the 'driving standards effect', a number of consultees were sceptical of this suggestion. This was a hinge point in terms of consultee perspective on the sector, and where some of the strongest criticism was found.

'Successful state school heads probably wouldn't go to independent schools for their models of educational quality or standards. [There are] probably two reasons for that. The first is [that] usually the context in which an underperforming state school is working is different to that of an independent school, and independent school teachers might not be any good at the kind of challenges and pressures that are being faced in that [state] school. [The second is that] I'm not sure it's helpful nationally to suggest that independent schools have higher quality and higher standards. It's very difficult to say that. They certainly have higher resources and each of them has commitment to quality, but you can find that in the state sector. I think it is more helpful for the future if we find our models of higher standards across both sectors and we use the most applicable model' – Expert witness.

Some consultees argued that the independent sector can only drive standards societally if their practice can be recreated in an affordable way. There were consultees who thought that the independent sector drives standards, but others argued that this was a false characterisation of the independent school product. Those who were critical argued that performance is superior to that of the state sector through methods that are expensive and unrealistic for the state sector, and that this 'preserve[s] the status quo.'

'I think, on the whole, independent schools have thought, "How do we keep doing exactly what we've always done with exactly the same people we've always done it with?" And if that's your approach, then instead of driving innovation and efficiency it drives high prices and inefficiency, frankly, because you are looking to preserve the status quo' – Expert witness.

Some consultees asserted that independent schools having high performance was bad *in and of itself*.

This was an important criticism in the context of the purposes and functions of education. There was first an argument from some consultees that fairness should be the central purpose of education, and that therefore high-quality independent schools cause more harm than good as the social value of having an excellent school is lower than the social cost of increasing inequality in the quality of schooling across the country – that one school improving is not always socially good. This argument related closely to the resource gap between state and independent schools – the argument that quality attained through additional resource is less fair than quality attained with the same resource.

Second was the 'economic' question about how education is most efficiently organised for the sake of output. Within this exists the concept of a 'brain drain'. Some consultees

asserted that spreading educational resource as evenly as possible would be the most efficient way to improve standards, and that a well-resourced independent sector with very good outcomes is an inefficient set-up. This depends on the bold assumption that the money parents invest in independently educating their children would go to state schools if independent schools did not exist. Presumably, this would be done through parents donating to the state schools their children attend, as some already do.

These, of course, relate closely to discussion around the resource gap between independent and state schools. This conversation will be returned to throughout this report as it is a fundamentally important part of the issue of widening opportunities for all.

Economic contribution

The independent sector is one of England's most successful and most internationally respected industries, which contributes significantly to the national economy.

'I can't think of any other industry in this country which is highly successful, which has been exported to so many countries successfully, which is seen to be world-class by many around the world, but which is, at best, ignored [politically] and at worst, is very often openly attacked [politically]' – Expert witness.

'Our great schools – including those that are exporting education overseas – are actually a massive benefit to the country rather than an appalling signal of privilege and elitism. Although don't say it too loudly, as it is also that' – Interviewee from within the sector.

First, the independent sector has a large and important economic footprint. Research from Oxford Economics provides a detailed analysis of this impact.

Economic contribution: 2022 Oxford Economics study

Independent schools 'make a significant contribution to national and local economies' in the UK, according to analysis by the economic consultancy Oxford Economics in their 2022 *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy* report.⁷⁵

They found that in 2021, ISC-affiliated schools alone contributed around £14.1 billion to the UK economy, across direct, indirect and induced channels. Almost half (£6.9 billion) of this £14.1 billion contribution was direct gross value added and was mainly the costs of employing teachers and support staff to carry out the day-to-day work of the school; a further £1.8 billion was indirect gross value added, since schools purchase goods and services from third parties; and £5.5 billion was calculated to be induced gross value added, as school staff, alongside staff in the schools' supply chain, spend their take-home pay in shops, on household services and so forth, and as such they support further production in the UK consumer economy.

⁷⁵ Oxford Economics (2022) *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy*. Available at: https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC_report_2022_FINAL_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 2 February 2024).

This £14.1 billion was equivalent to 0.7 per cent of UK GDP in 2021. Widening the scope to include all independent schools across the UK, the economic contribution was even greater – amounting to £16.5 billion.⁷⁶

They also found the independent school sector supported over 328,000 jobs. For ISC-affiliated schools alone, this figure was around 282,000 and included 152,290 teachers and support staff directly employed by schools; 33,550 indirect jobs which were supported by ISC schools' procurement of goods and services from third party businesses; and 96,140 induced jobs in the UK's consumer economy supported by the salary-funded spending of staff in the school and the supply chain.⁷⁷

In terms of tax revenue, independent schools supported £5.1 billion in tax revenues in 2021. £4.3 billion of that came from ISC-affiliated schools and was made up of £2.0 billion in direct taxes paid by ISC schools and their staff; £0.4 billion of indirect taxation collected along the schools' supply chain; and £1.9 billion of induced taxation which was generated by ISC employees' salary-funded spending.⁷⁸

In terms of tax savings, they found that all independent schools in the UK saved the taxpayer at least £4.4 billion as a result of the independent school sector taking pupils who would otherwise potentially take up a place in the state school sector. (The calculation used by Oxford Economics to come to these savings figures considered teaching and other recurrent costs in the UK state school sector, plus capital costs associated with the use of land, construction of school buildings, and property maintenance. However, it did not include central administrative costs and so these numbers are likely to be an underestimate of the full amount of the saving.)⁷⁹

There are a number of other channels through which the independent sector contributes economically.

The contribution of independent schools to the English economy through fee-paying international students, and then through their spending outside of the schools and the spending of those who visit them in England, is one channel through which the independent sector contributes to the economy through exports.

This channel can have wider external impacts as well, including when these students continue onto UK universities and through links with other countries being enhanced by their wealthiest families educating their children in England.⁸⁰ This, however, also received some criticism as a model for not contributing to the 'domestic social contract' and therefore not being charitable.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Oxford Economics (2022) *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy*. Available at: https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC_report_2022_FINAL_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 2 February 2024).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

‘Some schools deliberately have a marketing strategy to attract as many international students as possible, especially from the Far East, in order to keep their head above water. I think that does make it morally harder to justify [charitable status]. I think there needs to be a contribution to the domestic social contract in order for that tax-exempt status to be sustainable’ – Expert witness.

It is worth noting here that only around 10 per cent of ISC pupils are non-British, according to the ISC,⁸¹ and that they contribute an estimated £0.6 billion to the economy.⁸²

The point on the international reputation of the independent school sector was also mentioned in terms of London in particular being an investment hub for the global education market. A number of very successful commercial school groups are headquartered in London.

‘If you look at Nord Anglia, which is a group of about 75 global schools, they are building a global teaching and learning platform [...] interestingly, they’ve moved their global headquarters from Hong Kong to London, so there’s a hint there, isn’t there?’ – Expert witness.

This international reputation also brings economic benefits to Britain through international franchising, which generates additional funds for British independent schools. The ISC estimates that there are over 6,000 UK-orientated international schools, generating significant income.⁸³ As well as an income generating activity, consultees explained international franchising as a genuine ‘educational partnership.’

‘The relationship is a franchise-like relationship [as you] get a fee based on a school name and a fee per capita for every pupil of it. You franchise your brand, but beneath that there is a true educational partnership’ – Expert witness.

Here, there is also a tangible ‘soft power’ element in terms of the extent to which British culture has global resonance through the independent schools sector. This is a theme highlighted in terms of the social capital justification of the sector, and is clear in its marketability when internationally franchised.

Criticism

The large economic footprint of the sector was also criticised at points as respondents referenced the possibility of a ‘brain drain’: that the economic footprint of independent schools is indicative of a sector that extracts the best teachers, brightest pupils and most engaged and resourced parents out of the state school system. The evidence given for this was the same as above, this simply represented a different perspective.

⁸¹ Independent Schools Council (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

⁸² Oxford Economics (2022) *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy*. Available at: https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC_report_2022_FINAL_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 2 February 2024).

⁸³ Oxford Economics (2022) *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy*. Available at: https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC_report_2022_FINAL_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 19 February 2024).

Spreading resource

Looking beyond the social offering that the independent sector provides through its conventional operations, the independent sector can provide social benefits by actively spreading its resources and working closely with the state sector.

'I think, we, speaking for the independent sector, allowed ourselves to get very, very distant from the state sector and we allowed ourselves to get very, very distant from state sector concerns. When I worked in the state sector [...] it felt like there was almost no meaningful interaction between the two sectors at all [leading to some politicians] talking about a "Berlin Wall". It also reflected a world in which I think the independent sector conceived of its charitable benefit [as being] in terms of providing bursaries rather than in terms of partnership work' – Expert witness.

'Now, I love bursaries [however] it has to be said [that] a bursary without a partnership scheme that counterbalances it is basically sending a message that our charitable purpose is to take children out of the state sector and bring them into our environment, and that is sufficient to view ourselves as a charitable institution. I don't think that is enough' – Expert witness.

A notable amount of the insight from consultees and a significant amount of the survey response focused on 'partnerships'. Arguably, partnerships was the central theme in the consultation – the word featured over 360 times in the transcripts of the 25 group discussions and interviews hosted, over 14 times per session.

As noted, 'partnership' was also the second most common measure of success cited by school leaders themselves, and the highest measure of success that did not directly relate to continued existence – in other words, for heads, assuming their schools continue to exist, it was the central concern. It was also, as with any major topic in the consultation, contested.

'It's a journey where you suddenly move from outreach to partnership, where you suddenly move from tokenism to meaningful, where you suddenly move from tactics to strategy, where you get to the point of co-design. [This] is where, rather than say, I've got a careers fair which has an excess capacity, you say, I'm going to co-design a careers fair with my state sector partner so it works for kids in both our schools' – Expert witness.

'[Partnering] defaults often to window-dressing, and I think most state schools that I know of have got state leaders who have got a need. They kind of know now their local independent school well enough to ask for that need if they want it. I think in terms of this report, should it be stressed as a really big priority? I'm not so sure, personally' – Expert witness.

The concept of partnership is wide-ranging and a substantial amount of brilliant and less brilliant activity done by independent schools fits within the overarching concept of a

partnership. Consequently, the usage of the term can be somewhat unclear and partnership work receives a large amount of criticism for ‘tokenism’. Many consultees considered the first step of partnership work to be sharing resources, such as facilities and the offering of less common subjects.

Use of facilities

Independent schools are known for having very high standards of facilities. Of course, many also do not, but there is a large stock of high-quality facilities within the sector, as discussed in Chapter 5.2. This can provide social benefit when these facilities become communally available.

‘The obvious thing which independent schools can do to help state schools are sharing their facilities – whether that’s academic facilities in terms of technological facilities, sports facilities, music facilities, loaning of teachers, especially for subjects which are not offered, sharing best practice’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

Range of subjects offered

Part of the ‘social capital justification’ (Chapter 2.1) of the independent sector and a key part of the individual offering (Chapter 2.2) of independent schools is impressive provision in areas with often no or limited provision in the state sector. Most common curricular examples are modern languages, classics, further maths, economics, music and drama – all subjects where the independent sector is significantly overrepresented in A-Level entries.⁸⁴ Outside of the assessed curriculum, the independent sector is known for its proficiency in music, theatre, dance and sport.

These pursuits all provide an individual benefit to independently-educated children. They can also, however, provide social benefit. One example of this is Olympic medal winners (discussed in Chapter 5.1), where we see that independent schools, in particular HMC schools, are large contributors of elite sportspeople in Britain.

Consultees addressed this in two main ways. First, that independent schools bear much of the cost of ensuring that uncommon subjects exist in the country’s cultural life. Second, through partnership with the state sector, independent schools bring these subjects to schools that otherwise would not do them.

*‘Minority subjects, like Latin, Greek, the classics, which [...] have gone off the curriculum for lots of reasons. I think there could be some good partnership, as with some sport, perhaps. I’m quite into sport but I’m not necessarily into rugby, but I sense it’s a sport that might have lost its footing in the state sector’ –
Parliamentarian.*

⁸⁴ ISC (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 19 February 2024).

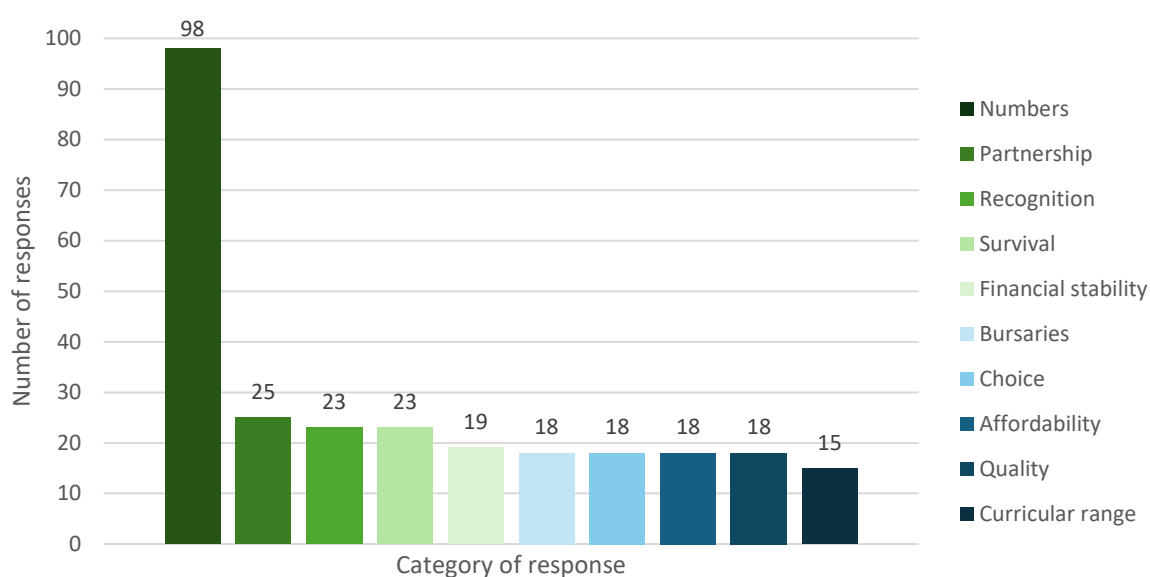
‘I think there are lots of our schools doing fantastic work with other local schools where access to music or Greek A-Level, or whatever it happens to be, is made available to children in the local area who go to schools where that wouldn’t be offered, [...] widening access to some of that rich and diverse curriculum without it all necessarily having to be delivered by all schools everywhere. [...] If we want these things in our cultural life, then it’s got to happen somewhere, and if it can be in an independent school, then if that takes the burden away in other parts of the education system, well then, actually, that could be a good thing’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

Concerns

There were two main concerns about spreading resource. First, some consultees argued that independent schools have no genuine interest in partnership and only do so for the sake of maintaining charitable status and appearing ethical. This assumption showed little interest in mutual learning and seemed to contradict the stress put on public benefit by survey respondents and consultees from within the sector. It was also viewed as unimportant so long as the partnership work is impactful and effective.

Figure 2.1 shows that when asked what success would look like in 10 years for their school and the independent sector as a whole, partnership work was the distant second most cited topic by respondents. Admittedly, the need to keep the school full dominated school leaders’ minds – although this does not contradict desiring public benefit.

Figure 2.1: Question 11: ‘What would success, or thriving, look like for your school and the sector as a whole in 10 years’ time?’, top 10 most common response categories, survey of school leaders



Source: Civitas survey of school leaders, see Appendix 2.

The second main concern throughout the narrative on partnerships was that the independent sector is too small. That partnership work of such a scale that it materially impacts the state school sector is difficult when the independent sector is so much smaller and geographically uneven. This is discussed in Chapter 5.

Transforming disadvantage

The capacity of the independent sector to provide ‘transformational’ bursaries to children whose parents could not otherwise afford to pay for their education has been a significant part of the offering of the sector for over 600 years and remains so.⁸⁵

A number of consultees suggested, however, that many lessons have been learnt in the last half century about how this should be done and that ‘targeted’ offering, where particular elements of the independent school practice are shared with children for whom they are most beneficial, is done. Two particular groups raised by several consultees were refugees and looked-after children.

As mentioned already, the smaller class sizes, increased individual attention, often longer school hours (or boarding) and focus on SEND and mental health found in independent education displays a sector already designed significantly for looked-after children and those in need.

The disadvantage faced by refugees and looked-after children is specific in the sense that it often relates to a lack of stable housing as well as financial disadvantage. Also, the children’s social care system is considered extremely expensive to run and very economically costly in the long-term, when considering the tremendous waste of brilliant children whose potential is never realised as a result of such a traumatic childhood. Alma Economics, in a study commissioned by the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, found that adverse outcomes of care leavers cost the taxpayer around £23 billion a year.⁸⁶

Here, consultees noted that boarding schools are primed to provide social benefit by taking on these children, and that through the Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF), this work is already ongoing and can continue to accelerate, as discussed in Chapter 3. Independent schools are also primed for this with their SEND provision and small class sizes, something which is extremely important to fragile or traumatised children. RNCSF placements have been found to save the state money.⁸⁷

‘There are an awful lot of independent schools that really have got very strong SEN provision. It’s not great for every looked after child, but it’s certainly right for a lot of looked after children. Smaller class sizes, attachment aware environments,

⁸⁵ Turner, D. (2015) *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School*, pp6-7.

⁸⁶ MacAlister, J. (2022) *Independent review of children’s social care*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

⁸⁷ Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*, Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

particularly in boarding where one sleeps; the access to stuff outside the classroom, SEN provision, post-16 career advice.’ – Expert witness.

Innovation

The autonomy of independent schools to choose how they operate allows the sector to be a ‘hotbed’ of educational ‘improvement’. Through this, innovation can be a means that the independent sector provides a social offering.

In *Much Promise*, Barnaby Lenon writes:

‘Reforms to the English education system have often mimicked best practice in private schools: the whole notion of independence (= Academies, Free schools), a focus on traditional academic subjects, character development, soft skills, extracurricular activities. The iGCSE, much loved by private schools, was the model for the recent GCSE reforms.’⁸⁸

Independent schools can be a ‘testing ground’ for educational ideas, ensuring an educational landscape that remains ‘diverse’ and on the cutting edge.

‘Leading’, in terms of sharing good practice, innovating and improving education, was the twelfth most common marker of success raised by independent school leaders when asked, ‘What would success, or thriving, look like for your school and the sector as a whole in years’ time?’.⁸⁹ On top of this, the ability of the independent sector to innovate was very frequently highlighted as a considerable part of what having an independent sector provides to the English educational landscape.

‘Without the large amount of structures that inevitably follow being part of a government department as a state school, the [independent sector has an] ability to innovate and try experimental things in education that can then feed through into the broader state sector’ – Expert witness.

Innovation: sharing practice

‘An effective partnership is learning together, from each other, in an even way, without one side or another feeling they’re somehow superior in some way. We’re all in it for children, aren’t we, at the end of the day’ – Expert witness.

A large number of consultees spoke about how the differences and similarities between the independent and state sector allows an opportunity for significant professional development by teachers working together and learning from one another across sectors.

‘The most important work done is professional development of teachers – where teachers from the state and independent sector realise what they can learn from what teaching is like in those sectors. Very often, although it’s not as stark as it used

⁸⁸ Lenon, B. (2017) *Much Promise: Successful Schools in England*. John Catt Educational Ltd., Melton., p42.

⁸⁹ The top 10 most common answers are displayed on Figure 2.1.

to be, independent school teachers are being made to think more about pedagogy than they've traditionally been, while state school teachers are made to realise the importance of subject knowledge' – Interviewee from within the sector.

'The partnerships between independent and state schools is worth its weight in gold in terms of the cross-fertilisation of ideas, because the state school teachers are amazingly well-trained, they've got some thumpingly good ideas. The problem is they haven't got a platform on which to deliver' – Expert witness.

Criticism

The main issue raised with this argument has been incidence. Many consultees considered there to be lower levels of innovation than would be optimal and some considered there to be virtually no educational innovation in the independent education sector.

'One of the things that I think is a shame is that we have this parallel sector, the independent school sector, that – on paper, at least – could be hugely innovative and actually do the hard work of lobbying for a better education for a state sector that often doesn't have the time. [...] it could show us what a really innovative school system looks like with really, properly, well-paid staff – because teachers are 100 per cent underpaid – doing really interesting stuff with the curriculum' – Expert witness.

'What we bring to education nationally is very valuable in terms of innovation. Although, don't say it too loudly, but I don't think we do enough of that' – Interviewee from within the sector.

For some, the confusion between innovation seemingly being a high priority for the sector and yet difficult to identify seemed clearer as they seemed to consider it a focus on 'materialism' – maximising statistics on academic grades, the range of extra-curricular activities and the extravagance of facilities.

'It's a failure of vision, basically. There's no gravitational centre because philosophical materialism is an abject failure in terms of its conceptual resources to stimulate creativity in the sphere of education. It has nothing to offer. The most you're ever going to get is mere utility' – Expert witness.

Innovation: Flexi-schooling and online schooling

There was some specific discussion of innovation that the sector could look towards. One was independent schools offering a range of price points, or levels of fees.

'I would quite like to see whether schools could offer multiple membership subscriptions and entry points so that a family that would go to a school in the holidays that might educate their kids in a state school in term-time, but by going to a school for extra-curricular or revision courses in the holidays might still be seen to be a pupil at that school and to try and make the impact of the school or the reputation of the school in the local area that much more by just being a site where a

vastly large number of families have access points into that school. There doesn't seem to be that much innovation when it comes to fees'– Expert witness.

Here was a suggestion of extending ideas of flexi-schooling and integrated education across schools/home learning into the idea of a 'community hub' of education, whereby some independent schools offered a core day educational programme and a wide range of other educational experiences for pupils who were partially home schooled or attend state schools.

2.4 Summary

There are a number of ways in which we can understand how the independent schools sector sees its purpose, depending on what this is in reference to.

- **Justifying the independent schools sector:** The independent schools sector justifies itself according to two overarching justifications: first, the 'rights' justification that parents have a right to spend money and exercise choice over their children's schooling. Second, the 'social capital' justification that independent schools are valuable to the country and should not be abolished.
- **Benefit to parents and pupils:** The independent schools sector benefits those who attend through two main ways: first, a high-quality schooling as measured by exceptional outcomes. Second, as a high-quality school experience, particularly measured through breadth, tailoring and distinctive ethos/characters.
- **Benefit to education, society and the economy:** The independent schools sector's benefit to education, society and the economy can be articulated in five groups; its high performance that drives standards, its economic contribution, mutual learning through the spreading of resource, transforming disadvantage and innovation.

These articulations highlight a number of important insights to understand about the nature of the independent sector.

- First and most obviously, independent schools understand themselves in terms of quality, offering high-quality schooling to those that attend and driving quality across the schooling landscape. This includes the protection of breadth.
- Alongside this quality, much of the independent schools sector is highly specialist, offering a distinct schooling for a particular cross-section of society.
- Independent schools very naturally cater to the most disadvantaged in the way their operations are set up. Their long charitable history, small class sizes, individualised attention, long hours (and boarding) all indicate an inclination towards the most disadvantaged – in particular looked-after children.
- There is a considerable appetite within the independent sector to partner closely with the state schools sector and it is a large amount of how the sector understands its own charitable purpose.

Chapter 3.

Fees and affordability

There are two important elements to the fees that independent schools charge. The first is their impact on affordability and therefore accessibility. The second is their impact on resource inequality between the state and independent school sectors. This chapter, the final chapter in Part 1: Understanding the sector, focuses on affordability, while Chapter 4 focuses on the resource gap between state and independent schools.

As in Chapter 1, there is a frequent assumption that all independent schools – like the best known independent schools – charge £40,000, £50,000 or even £60,000 per pupil per year. On the other hand, some within the sector argue that their fees are low enough that their cohort of parents is reflective of the country; that all walks of life are accommodated and that the sector is full of ‘typical’, ‘hard-working’ families. Neither of these capture the full reality.

The first question addressed in this chapter is what independent school fees actually are. As with the size of the independent schools sector, this question does not have a simple answer; it varies geographically, by age group, and of course by whether pupils board – although boarding fees do not reflect school fees well as they include accommodation costs, which are distinct.

The next question is the impact of school fees on affordability and school choice of parents. We look at the impact on financial accessibility in three ways: whether parents say that they can afford fees and how this relates to income, whether parents use independent schools and how this relates to income, and then why parents choose to use independent or state schools and how this relates to fees.

These all provide the same outcome: that independent schools are overwhelmingly attended by families with very high incomes, although some children from middle- and low-income families do attend.

Chapter summary

How expensive is an independent school place?

- The average annual day fee at day ISC schools in England was £18,600 for the 2023/24 academic year. Average annual boarding fees in England were £42,519.
- From 1980 to 2016, independent school fees trebled in real terms and doubled as a proportion of 95th percentile income. The growth since then has been slower, but still faster than incomes and prices.
- Across the nine regions of England, average day fees vary by more than £8,000. They are highest in London, where they are an average of £21,729 including nursery fees.

How accessible are independent schools?

- **Help paying:** Just over a third of ISC pupils receive fee assistance, but this excludes those who receive informal support from family and/or friends. Our polling found that, all included, 65 per cent of independent school parents receive help paying for fees.
- **View of affordability:** Parents' conception of whether they can afford independent schools naturally varies with income, and with degree of difficulty. Under half of those with a self-reported household income of £55,000 to £76,000 said that they could afford independent schooling, and only 12 per cent of this group said that they could afford it easily.
- **Who uses independent schools?** Seventy-six per cent of parents whose children use independent schools have a self-reported household income above £118,000. For context, the ninth decile (second tenth from the top) household income in the UK is £83,472.
- **Why parents use independent schooling:** The main reason parents use independent schooling is the standard of education, with 36 per cent citing it as the main reason, more than double any other answer.
- **Why parents do not use independent schooling:** The main reason parents do not use independent schooling is that they cannot afford it, with 53 per cent citing it as the main reason, more than triple any other answer.

3.1 How expensive is an independent school place?

Medium- and long-term fee inflation

In the period from 1980 to 2016, independent school fees were estimated to have tripled in real terms. This represents a doubling in fees as a proportion of 95th percentile income, over the same 36-year period.⁹⁰ The price trebled compared to other prices in the economy and doubled compared to top incomes.

In the period since 2016, the growth of fees has slowed, although they have still grown faster than both incomes and other prices.

In the last decade, average day school fees have risen from £12,057 per year in 2014 (£15,859 in 2024 prices) to £18,063 per year in 2024, a 14 per cent rise when accounting for inflation, or a 50 per cent nominal rise.⁹¹

ISC school fees have also grown slightly faster than incomes, even top incomes, over the available data. They increased from 25.8 per cent of 90th percentile personal post-tax income in 2010 to 30.6 per cent in 2022, and from 20.5 per cent to 23.4 per cent of 95th percentile personal post-tax income in the same period. This has almost certainly accelerated in the last two years, for which we do not have the income data.

The cause of fee inflation is somewhat contested. There are three main views: that fees have risen with costs, that fees have risen as independent schooling has become more luxurious (a ‘facilities arms race’), and that fees have risen because demand has grown faster than supply. Some cite a fourth reason – a ‘Veblen effect’⁹² of parents desiring an exclusive or ‘reassuringly expensive’ product, but this is less common than the previous three views.

It is worth noting that the data in Figure 3.1 is for the whole of the UK and excludes nursery fees, which are typically lower.

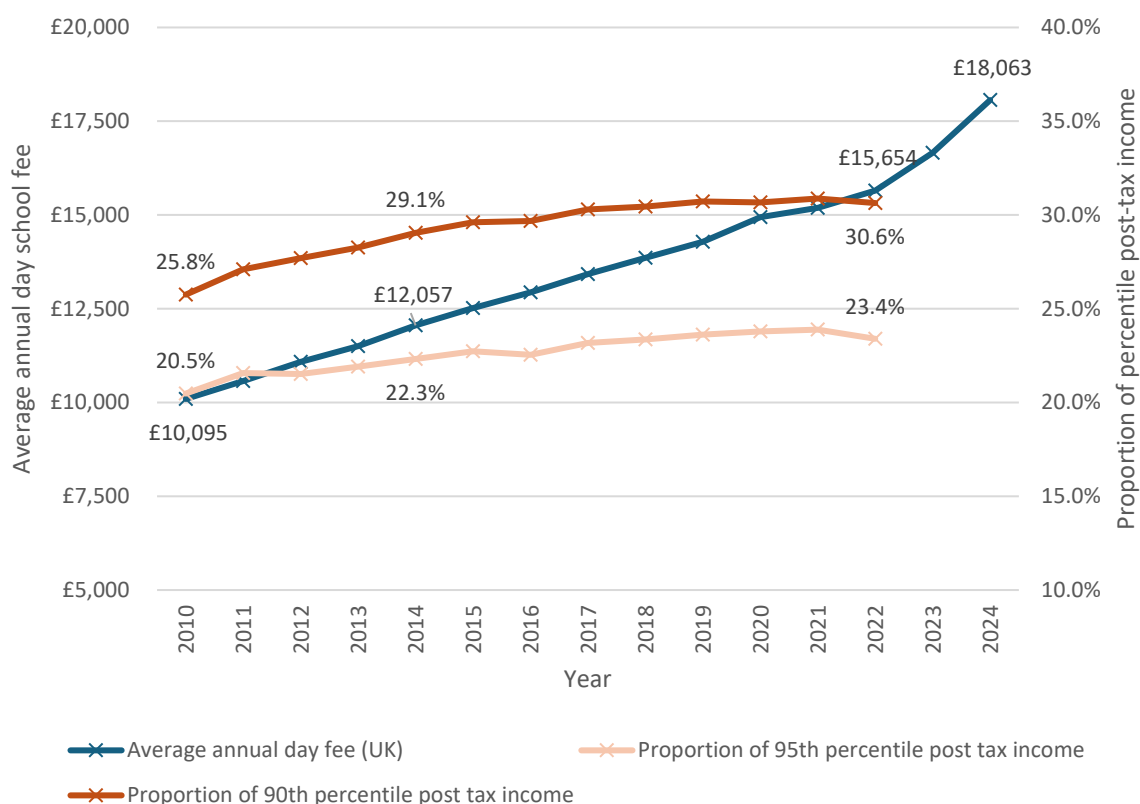
Given the likelihood that all of these reasons are true to some extent; this question is returned to in Chapter 4.

⁹⁰ Green, F. et al. (2017) *Who Chooses Private Schooling in Britain and Why?* UCL Institute of Education.

⁹¹ Bank of England inflation calculator, Available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> (Accessed: 15 October 2024). £12,057 in 2014 was worth £15,859 in January 2024.

⁹² A Veblen effect is where demand rises as prices increase for a luxury good as the higher price is viewed as indicative of higher quality.

Figure 3.1: Comparison of Independent Schools Council member day school fees with top incomes, UK, 2010-2024



Source: Independent School Council (2024) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3j/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 6 September 2024) and His Majesty's Revenue & Customs (2024) *Percentile points from 1 to 99 for total income before and after tax*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/percentile-points-from-1-to-99-for-total-income-before-and-after-tax> (Accessed: 6 September 2024).

Across the country

Annual independent school day fees vary by nearly £9,000 across the nine regions of England. This variation is more than the average state school funding per pupil. It is worth noting that independent schools in Wales and Scotland are, on average, less expensive than those in England.

Table 3.1 details average day and boarding school fees in different regions, and what these average fees are as a percentage of the UK average. These figures include nursery fees, meaning that the average annual UK fee is £17,757 for this data.

Table 3.1: Independent school fees by region and compared with UK average, England, 2023/24

Region	Day fee (day schools)	As proportion of UK day average	Boarding fee	As proportion of UK boarding average
London	£21,729	122.4%	£47,586	112.1%
South East	£19,245	108.4%	£43,329	102.0%
East	£18,619	104.9%	£40,014	94.2%
South Central	£18,021	101.5%	£44,412	104.6%
South West	£16,071	90.5%	£42,792	100.8%
North East	£14,997	84.5%	£32,937	77.6%
West Midlands	£14,964	84.3%	£43,038	101.4%
Yorkshire and Humber	£14,934	84.1%	£27,480	64.7%
East Midlands	£15,537	87.5%	£42,381	99.8%
North West	£12,936	72.9%	£36,705	86.4%

Source: Independent School Council (2024) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2024*. Available at:

https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 7 August 2024). These numbers include nursery fees.

As Table 3.1 shows, independent school day fees vary massively across the regions of England, with fees in London 67 per cent higher than those in the North West. In general, the table shows that average independent school fees are skewed by very high fees in London. It is also clear that there is a national split between the expensive regions in the south (London, South East, East, South Central, South West) and inexpensive regions in the Midlands and the north (East Midlands, North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, West Midlands, North West).

In general, there is slightly less variation across boarding fees, with five of the nine regions charging a fee that is within five per cent of the UK average, compared to just two regions for day fees. However, boarding fees in the most expensive region (London) are 73 per cent higher than in the cheapest region (Yorkshire and the Humber).

Other fee variations

Age groups

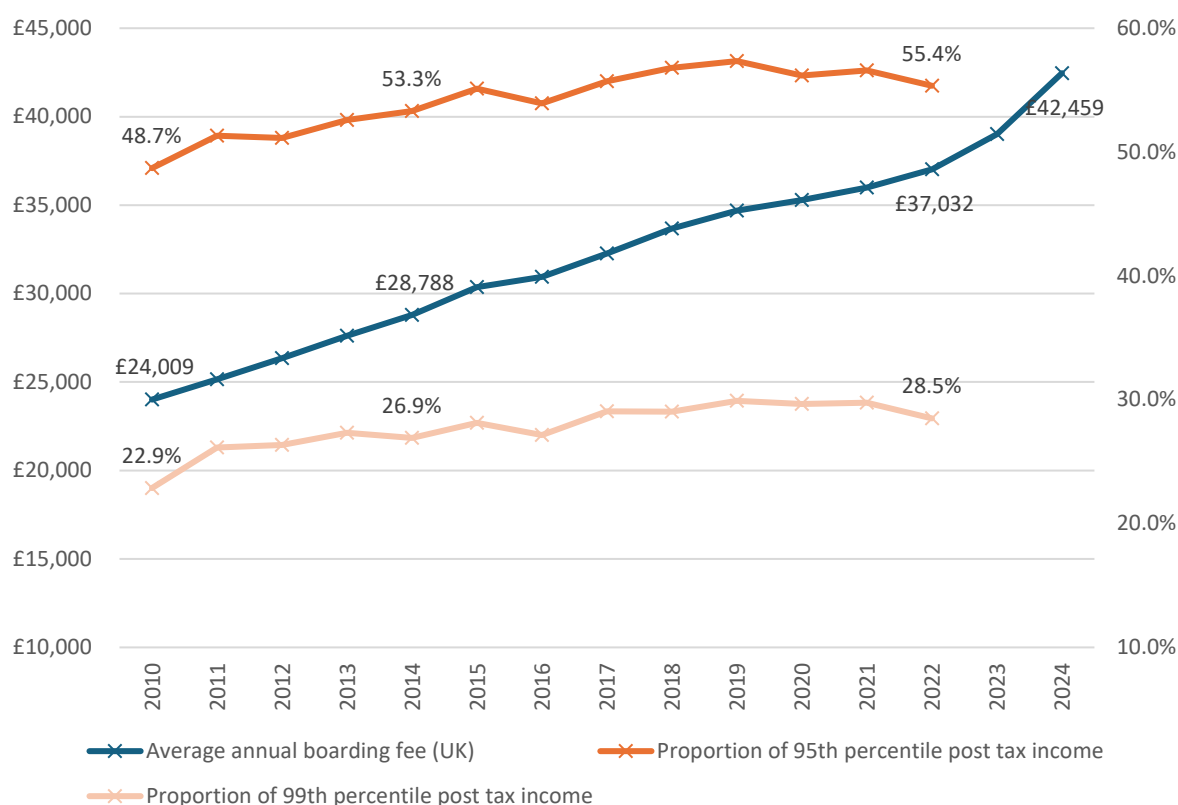
Independent school fees are higher for older pupils, varying by just under 20 per cent across age groups. Junior day fees at day schools in 2024 are £16,503 per annum, compared to £19,089 per year for senior day fees at day schools and £19,719 per annum for sixth form day fees at day schools. The same pattern is true for boarding schools, where annual fees are £30,645 (junior), £41,862 (senior) and £44,373 (sixth form). This corresponds with falling pupil-teacher ratios, as shown in Chapter 4.1.

Boarding school fees

Boarding school fees, for the relatively small number of ISC pupils who board, are understandably much higher, as they include all accommodation and around the clock supervision costs. Even for 95th percentile incomes, which is approximately the independent school customer market, boarding school fees are over half – 55.4 per cent – of annual post-tax income.

Notably, although boarding fees rose by 54 per cent in nominal terms from 2010 to 2022, as a proportion of 95th percentile post-tax income they only increased by 14 per cent, as these incomes also grew significantly over the period.

Figure 3.2: Comparison of Independent Schools Council member boarding school fees with top incomes, UK



Source: Independent School Council (2024) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3j/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 7 August 2024). and His Majesty's Revenue & Customs (2024) *Percentile points from 1 to 99 for total income before and after tax*, Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/percentile-points-from-1-to-99-for-total-income-before-and-after-tax> (Accessed: 7 August 2024).

Fee quartiles over the last decade

Table 3.2 shows independent day school and boarding school fee quartiles for 2013 and 2023. The exceptional nature of the year-on-year change from 2023 to 2024 makes this a useful presentation. These figures do not precisely compare with those in Figures 3.1 and

3.2, as they exclude Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They do, however, illustrate that there is a positive skew in independent school fees in England – the median fee is noticeably lower than the mean fee (£15,915 median and £16,656 mean), which shows that most schools have fees below the average, due to some schools having very high fees and few having much lower fees.

Table 3.2: Independent school fee quartiles, England, 2013 and 2023

Quartile	Boarding fee (2013)	Boarding fee (2023)	Change 2013-2023 (boarding)	Day fee (day schools) (2013)	Day fee (day schools) (2023)	Change 2013-2023 (day)
Lower quartile (1 st)	£24,705	£35,478	+43.6%	£9,306	£13,215	+42.0%
Median (2 nd)	£28,350	£40,560	+43.1%	£10,992	£15,915	+44.8%
Upper quartile (3 rd)	£30,900	£43,350	+40.3%	£13,299	£19,545	+47.0%

Source: Independent Schools Council analysis.

Table 3.2 also shows that fees have grown at a very similar rate for the first, second and third quartiles.

For day schools, the gap between the first and second quartiles (of £2,700 per annum) is 34 per cent less than the gap between the second and third quartiles (of £3,630 per annum). This further shows that there is a positive skewness to fees, with fees more highly concentrated at the lower end.

Fee assistance

Just over a third (33.5 per cent) of ISC pupils in England receive fee assistance, a total of 182,675 pupils. These pupils receive an average £7,533 per year, a little over a third of the average day fee, for a total of £1.38 billion per year in fee assistance. Over £1 billion of this is from ISC member schools and over £500 million of this is specifically means-tested contributions⁹³ from those schools.

Large levels of fee assistance from ISC member schools have remained strong in the 26 years since the end of the Assisted Places Scheme (see Chapter 6.3 for an explanation of the Assisted Places Scheme). Looking back a decade to 2014, 33.4 per cent of ISC pupils received fee assistance, at an average of £6,165 (2024 prices), for a total of £1.03 billion (2024

⁹³ Fee assistance that is determined based on the parents' financial means.

prices).⁹⁴ This shows that fee assistance has not only remained high but grown by over a third in real terms in a decade, more than that of fees.

Isolating means-tested contributions from schools, we see that in 2014, eight per cent of pupils received means-tested contributions from schools, for a total of £427 million (2024 prices). A decade later, in 2024, it was still eight per cent of pupils receiving means-tested contributions from schools but the total value received was an estimated £539 million, up over a quarter in real terms.

‘They’re two different things, scholarships and bursaries. Bursaries are the access, means-tested, fee subsidies. [In recent years] there has been a shift towards means-tested [bursaries] and away from non-means tested scholarships, which I think has been part of this political readjustment [sic]. [...] Bursaries providing access to a wider cross-section of society is much more, to me, hitting the sweet spot of inclusion and eroding the idea that [independent schooling] is just for the rich.’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

ISC data shows that, in 2024, there were 12,918 pupils receiving means-tested bursaries equal to at least 75 per cent of the school fee, accounting for just over a third of pupils with means-tested bursaries and 2.3 per cent of all ISC pupils. A further 3.1 per cent of all ISC pupils are on means-tested bursaries equal to between 25 and 75 per cent of the school fee. This means that around one in 18 independent school children are receiving means-tested bursaries in excess of a quarter of the fee.

⁹⁴ £4,687 in 2014 prices. Calculated using: Bank of England. *Inflation calculator*. Available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> (Accessed: 8 August 2024).

3.2 How accessible are independent schools?

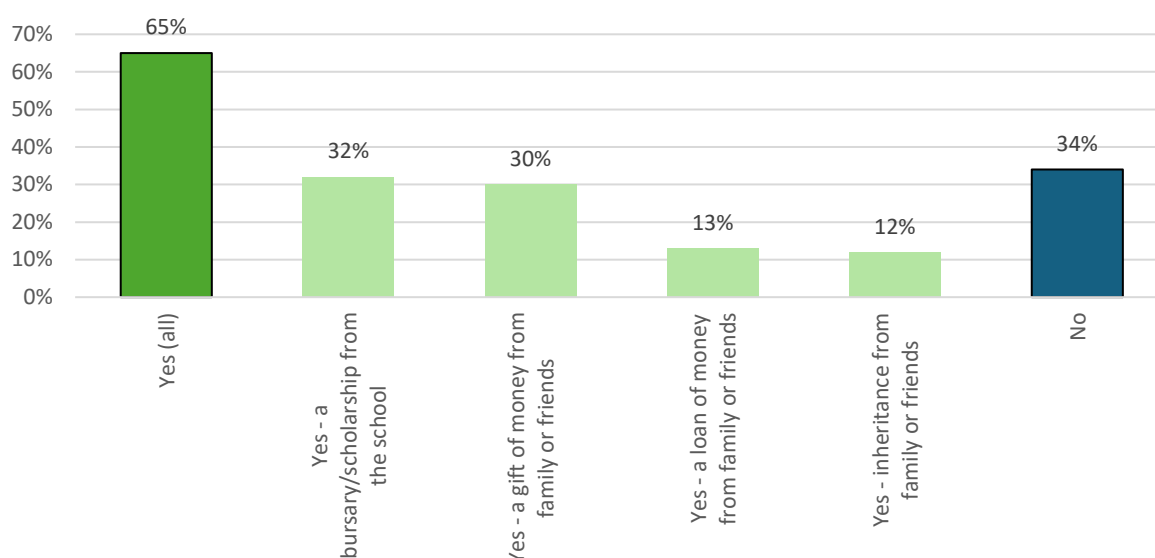
It goes without saying that these fees result in independent schools being predominantly available to affluent parents, however, it is important to ascertain the extent to which this is the case. Parents that want to send their children to independent school are often willing to pay a large proportion of household income as they often consider it to be of the highest priority.

Affordability of the independent sector

The first thing to note is that most parents who send their children to independent schools receive help paying school fees (65 per cent, Figure 3.3). The far-left column shows all parents who received some help, the middle three columns look at the incidence of types of help – some parents received more than one type. We also see that a minority of parents – even among those who send their children to independent school – say they can afford independent schools easily (37 per cent, Figure 3.4).

Almost half (43 per cent) of parents who do not send their children to independent school said that they could afford it, although only 10 per cent of this group said that they could afford it easily. Of the 55 per cent that said that they could not afford it, 47 per cent said that if they could easily afford it, they would be likely to send their children to an independent school, compared to 36 per cent that considered it unlikely even if they could afford it.

Figure 3.3: Poll of parents: ‘You said that one or more of your children attends private school. Have any of the following helped you to pay their school fees?’⁹⁵



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-31 January 2024. One per cent of respondents answered ‘Don’t know’. Subsample of 266 parents of children attending independent schools.

⁹⁵ One thing to highlight is that the polling questions opt for the term ‘private school’, whilst this report uses ‘independent school’, the two terms are synonymous.

Figure 3.4: Poll of parents: ‘Would you say that you can or cannot afford to send your child(ren) to a private school, setting aside any bursaries or scholarships that might be available?’



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-31 January 2024.

It is worth noting that a number of these parents may be overestimating their capacity to spend, and potentially underestimating typical fees. This does, however, also highlight the extent to which parents will spend large amounts of money on their children.

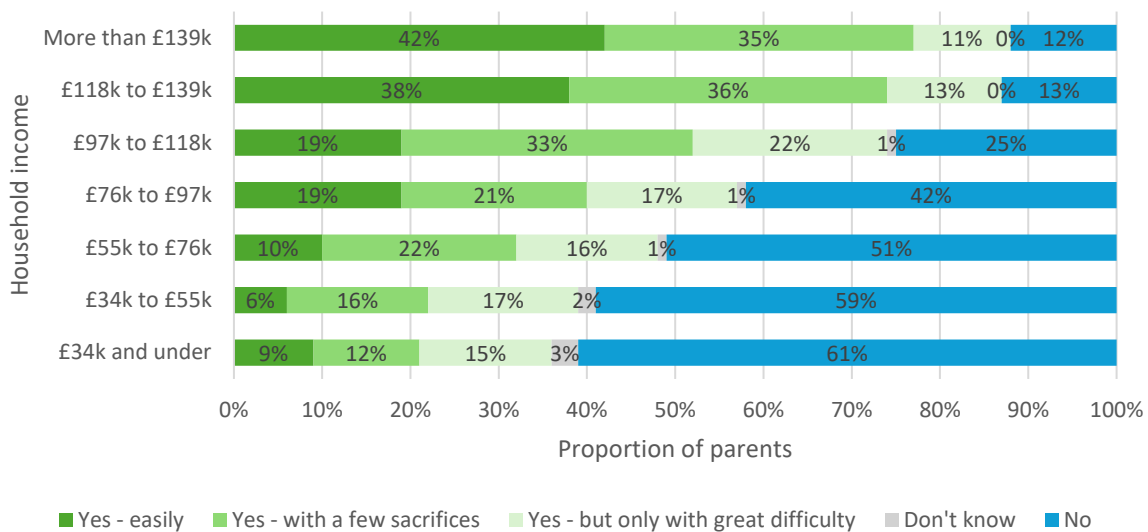
Another illuminating observation on affordability was how parents’ views on whether they could afford independent schooling changed with their household income (Figure 3.5).

We see that the first group in which over half of parents think that they could afford independent school – including those for whom it would require great difficulty – is the group with a household income estimated at between £76,000 and £97,000. Just 19 per cent of this group think that they could afford it easily.

The first group whereby over half of parents think that they could afford independent schooling either easily or with a few sacrifices is the group with an estimated household income between £97,000 and £118,000 – a very high household income.

This perhaps suggests a product affordable with sacrifice to a reasonably wide range of household incomes, but affordable without significant sacrifice to only those on the very highest incomes.

Figure 3.5: Poll of parents: ‘Would you say that you can or cannot afford to send your child(ren) to a private school, setting aside any bursaries or scholarships that might be available?’



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-31 January 2024.

Who uses independent schools?

What characteristics correlate positively with independent school usage?

There were a number of clear characteristics that meant parents were much more likely to send their children to independent school. These factors are highly correlated, limiting what these observations tell us about the relative isolated importance of each (this is known as multicollinearity and can create a bias in correlation results). This analysis focuses on the relationship between income and independent school usage.

- Income was a very clear factor in the likelihood of parents sending their children to independent school.
 - While 29 per cent of respondents with an estimated household income above £97,000 a year sent their children to independent schools, just three per cent of those with an estimated household income below £55,000 a year did.
 - The mean reported household income of parents who sent their children to independent school was £97,000 to the nearest £1,000. For those who sent their children to state schools it was £50,000.
- Parental schooling was a clear factor in whether parents sent their children to independent school. Thirty-eight per cent of those who had been to independent school themselves also sent their children to independent school, compared with five per cent of those who had not been to independent school.
- Home ownership was also a clear factor in whether parents sent their children to independent school. Twenty-three per cent of respondents that owned their homes outright, without a mortgage, sent their children to independent school, whilst just five

per cent of those who owned their homes with a mortgage and three per cent of those who did not own their homes sent their children to independent school.

- Alongside this, estimated house value was a clear factor in the likelihood of parents sending their children to independent school. Whilst 36 per cent of those with an estimated house value above £1 million sent their children to independent school, just five per cent of those with an estimated house value below £500,000 did.
- Education level was also a clear factor. Most notably, parents who were not university educated were very unlikely to send their children to independent schools. Ten per cent of university-educated respondents sent their children to independent schools, compared with one per cent of those who were not university-educated.

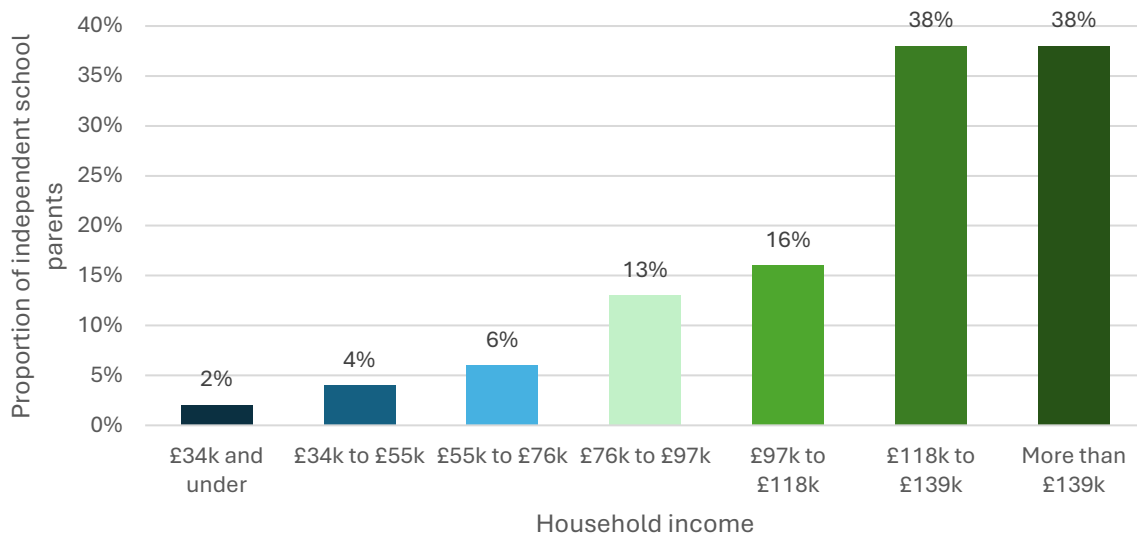
Who uses independent schools according to income?

Looking directly at the question of who uses independent schools, we can see the breakdown of parents who independently educate their children by household income group. Figure 3.7 provides household income deciles (tenths) to contextualise the incomes of independent school parents. These deciles are specifically for households where the reference person (principal earner) is not retired and there are dependent children.

The clearest observation is that the £55,000 to £76,000 income group covers almost half of households with children in the UK, and yet less than 15 per cent of independent school households. UK household income is very concentrated in the £45,000 to £70,000 income range, a group which around two thirds of independent school parents are above. For almost four in ten independent school parents, their household income exceeds £139,000.

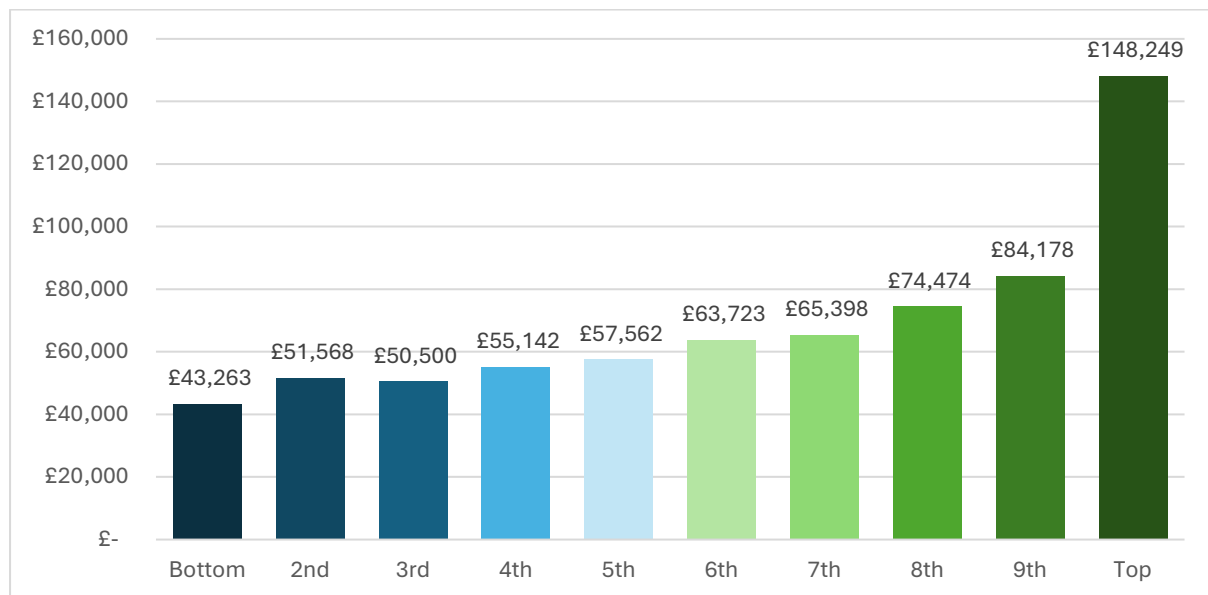
This finding is less severe than one might have expected but is still striking. It brings into question whether independent schooling is genuinely a choice for most families.

Figure 3.6: Poll of parents: Independent school attendance by parental household income



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-31 January 2024.

Figure 3.7: Final household incomes of *non-retired individuals with dependent children* by income decile group, UK, 2022/23



Source: Office for National Statistics (2024) *Effects of taxes and benefits on UK household income: financial year ending 2023, Table 11*, Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/theeffectsoftaxesa ndbenefitsonhouseholdincome/financialyearending2023> (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

Research from the UCL Institute of Education (2017) supports this conclusion. They estimated that at the 100th percentile, 60 per cent of children go to an independent school, a proportion that falls to one in seven for those in the 95th percentile and under two per cent

for the bottom seven deciles.⁹⁶ This research found that independent schooling is sufficiently expensive that increases in income do not tangibly make parents more likely to purchase independent schooling for the bottom 70 per cent of the income spectrum.

Why parents choose independent schooling

Our polling asked the British public why they thought parents might choose to send their children to an independent school. In a separate poll, we also asked parents for the most important factor in deciding which school type they chose for their children.

The former tells us about the perception of the sector and the latter directly tells us why parents choose independent schooling.

Perceived importance of reasons for choosing independent schooling

‘Giving their children the highest possible standard of education’ was viewed as an important reason parents send their children to independent school by 81 per cent of the public. This was only behind ‘giving their children access to the best available school facilities’, with 82 per cent of the public considering this an important reason. Most other respondents considered facilities ‘neither important nor unimportant’ – extremely few considered it ‘unimportant’.

The least important factor, by some margin, was that of ‘enabling their children to mix with others from a similar background.’ It was almost five times as likely as the other options to be considered unimportant, at 15 per cent.

Actual importance of reasons for choosing independent schools

Overall, parents whose children attended independent schools were most likely to consider wanting their children to get the highest possible standard of education to be the most important factor in their decision to independently educate their children. This was given as the most important factor more than twice as often as any other factor. There were seven factors that parents chose between as the most important factor for them.

Parents were unlikely to consider pastoral care (10 per cent), a desire for their children to mix with others from a similar background (six per cent) or concern about their children being bullied (five per cent) to be the most important factor in their decision to send children to independent school.

All of these observations suggest that public perceptions were accurate, both in terms of the standard of education being extremely important and in terms of the background of the children at the school not being considered important.

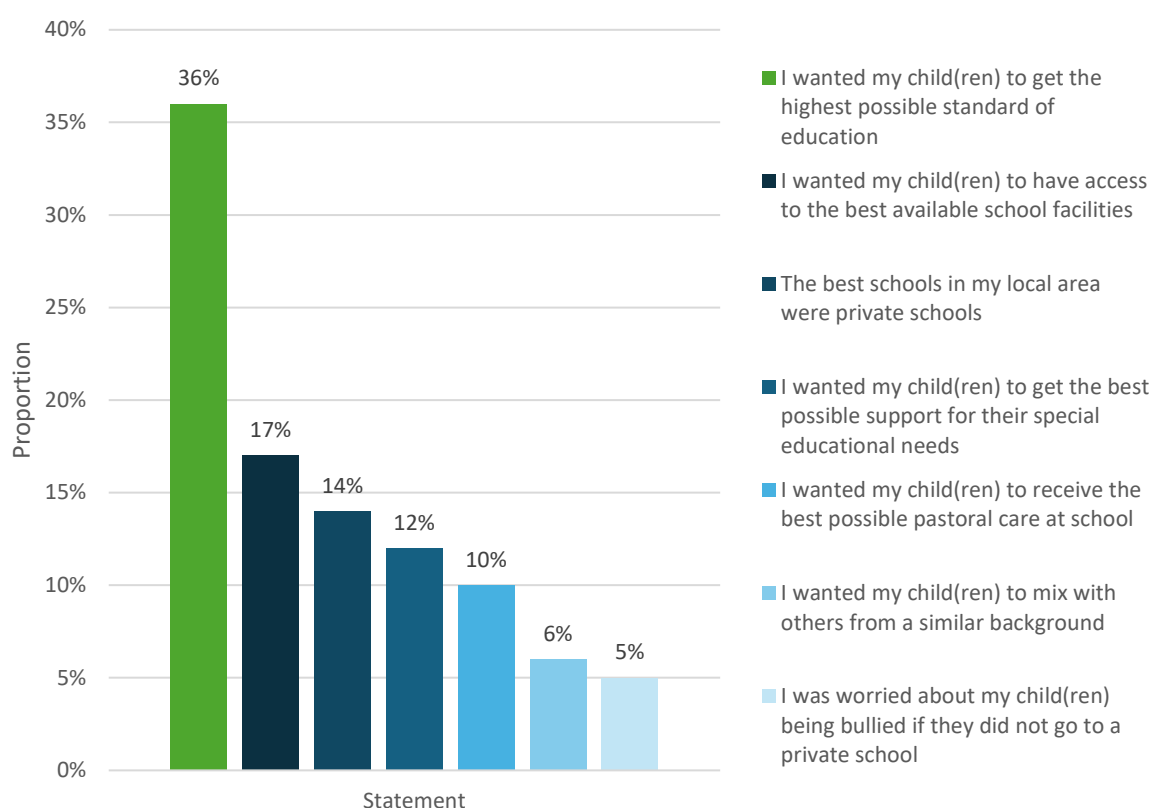
This also links with what parents thought was especially good about independent schools, with material factors such as facilities being more popular than less measurable offerings such as pastoral care. This raises into question some of the discussion in Chapter 2 about the

⁹⁶ Green, F. et al. (2017) *Who Chooses Private Schooling in Britain and Why?* UCL Institute of Education.

offering of independent schools being as much about tailoring and individual care as performance and quality.

These largely match UCL Institute of Education research which, using evidence from 2003/04 found that ‘General Quality’ (68.0 per cent) and ‘Academic Quality’ (62.6 per cent) were twice as important as any other factor in parents’ motivations for choosing independent schooling.⁹⁷

Figure 3.8: Poll of parents: ‘You said that one or more of your children attends a private school. Please say which of the following was the most important factor in your decision to send your child(ren) to a private school’, independent school parents



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-31 January 2024. Subsample of 266 parents of children attending independent schools. Percentages do not sum to 100 per cent as responses ‘Don’t know’ and ‘Other’ have been excluded.

Respondents who did not send their children to independent school were asked what the most important factor was in their decision not to send their children to independent school (Figure 3.9).

Overall, 53 per cent of state school parents said that the most important factor in their decision not to independently educate their children was that they could not afford it. This was more than three times as many as those who gave any other factor. Notably, this

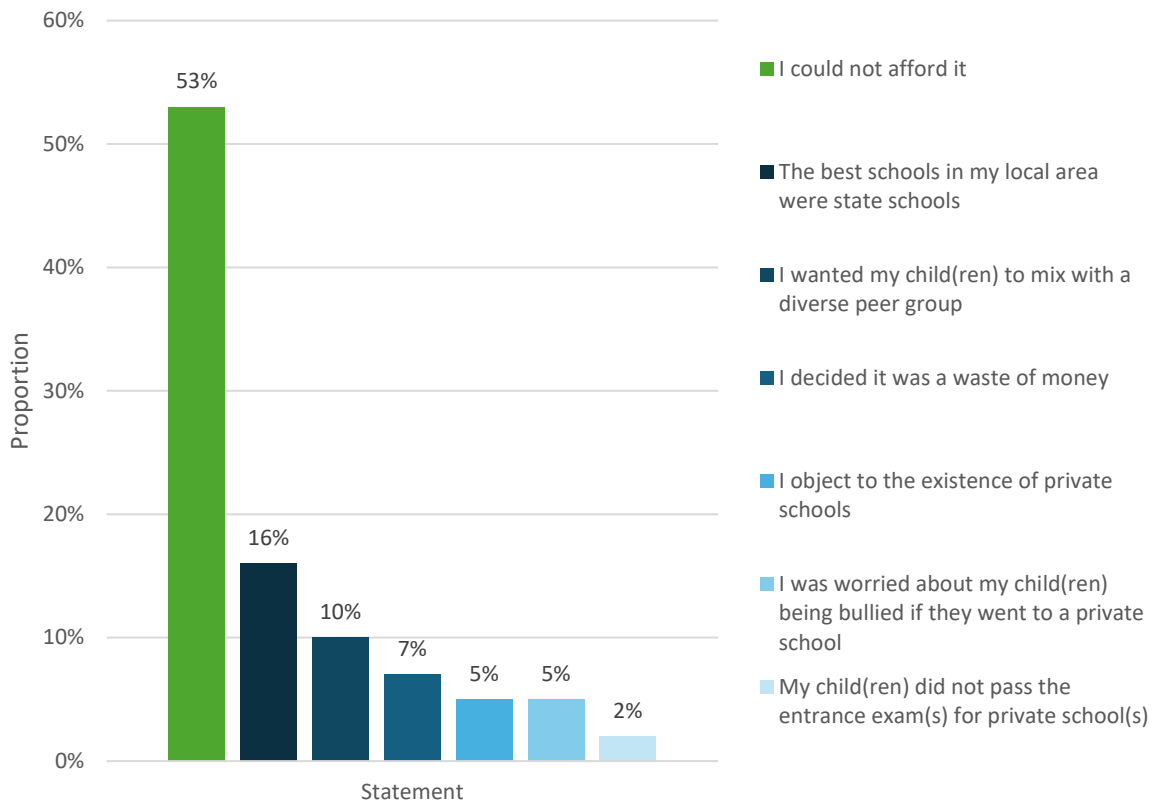
⁹⁷ Green, F. et al. (2017) *Who Chooses Private Schooling in Britain and Why?*, UCL Institute of Education, p23.

proportion was down to 38 per cent of those who send their children to grammar schools, with 21 per cent of that group instead choosing ‘the best schools in my local area were state schools’.

Viewing independent schools as a waste of money was a generally uncommon reason why parents had chosen not to send their children to independent schools, including among those who could afford them. State school parents who said that they *could* afford independent schools were more than three times as likely to have chosen state schooling because of not being able to afford independent schooling (30 per cent) as to have considered it a waste of money (nine per cent). This highlights starkly that many of those who could afford independent schooling could only do so with considerable sacrifice.

Objecting to the existence of independent schools was also very unlikely to be the most important factor in parents’ decision not to use independent schools – *even among those who did object to their existence*. Just 16 per cent of the state school parents that thought independent schools should not exist had chosen not to independently educate their children because of objecting to their existence, well behind the proportion of that group who chose not to independently school their children because they were unable to afford it (39 per cent).

Figure 3.9: Poll of parents: ‘You said that none of your children attends a private school. Please say which of the following was the most important factor in your decision not to send your child(ren) to a private school’, state school parents



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-22 January 2024. Percentages do not sum to 100 per cent as responses ‘Don’t know’ and ‘Other’ have been excluded.

3.3 Summary

- The average independent school fee was £18,063 in the 2023/24 academic year. This ranged significantly across the country (nearly £22,000 in London and under £13,000 in the North West) and also varies significantly with age group.
- Over a third of independently educated children receive some fee assistance, but less than six per cent receive means tested bursaries of over 25 per cent of the overall fee.
- The affordability story for the independent sector shows some notable characteristics:
 - Over 50 per cent of those who independently educated their children in our polling had a self-reported annual household income exceeding £90,000.
 - Independent school parents are disproportionately likely to have been to independent schools themselves, to be home owners and for that house to have a high value.
 - Including those who could only afford to with great difficulty, just 49 per cent of those with a self-reported annual household income between £55,000 and £76,000 said that they could afford independent schooling.

Part 2:

The independent schools sector within the wider school system

Having looked in detail at the nature of the independent sector, this part turns to evaluating the sector as it sits within the whole English schools system.

Chapters 4 and 5 compare the independent and state school sector's respective contexts and look at how their incomes and outcomes compare with one another. In outcomes, the relationship between the independent and state school sectors is also evaluated.

Chapter 6 focuses on the reputation of the independent sector; how it is perceived by the general public and how politicians evaluate the independent schools sector within the wider education landscape.

Chapter 4.

The independent and state school sectors: Incomes

This chapter focuses on how independent and state school incomes differ.

We first analyse the nature and size of the resource gap between independent and state schools, so often the key note in criticisms of the independent schools sector. This is addressed in four dimensions: funding per pupil, pupil-teacher ratios, parental involvement, and human capital.

We then look at the nature of state and independent school incomes. First, we explain the design of the National Funding Formula, according to which state schools are resourced. Next, we look at independent school income. This is mostly a question of pricing strategy, as so much of independent schools' income is derived from fees, but it also raises the wider question of income diversification. We briefly discuss four other income streams that independent schools utilise.

Chapter summary

The independent-state resource gap

- Estimates for the total income gap vary, but the IFS estimates that ISC schools have around 90 per cent more income per pupil than state schools.
- The pupil-teacher ratio – how many pupils there are for each teacher – is 18.1 in the state sector and just 8.8 in the ISC.

State school income

- Average state school income is an estimated £7,690 per pupil for 2024/25.⁹⁸
- Almost all of this, 93.5 per cent, is per-pupil funding, with each pupil having a specific funding allocation according to a basic rate plus a lump sum for each additional need they have.
- The vast majority of the rest of state school funding is a lump sum (£134,400 for 2024-25) paid to all schools.
- These numbers are then subject to an area cost adjustment according to salary costs in different parts of England and two safeguards: a minimum per-pupil funding level and a minimum year-on-year increase.

Independent school income

- There is no aggregate official data for the proportion of independent school income which is derived from fees, but consultees estimated it at typically between 95 and 98 per cent.
- Income is therefore significantly decided by pricing – upon which there are upwards and downwards demand pressures.
- Other income streams include monetising expertise, monetising facilities, monetising brand and donations and legacies. These are more realistic for larger, older schools.

⁹⁸ UK Government (2024) *School funding statistics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-funding-statistics> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

4.1 The independent-state resource gap

Funding per pupil per year

One of the most cited differences between the independent and state sectors is the resource gap.

Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) in 2023 found that the gap between state school spending per pupil (including capital spending, as independent school fees fund capital expenditure) and average ISC fees was £7,200 per pupil per year in 2022/23.⁹⁹ This meant that independent schools had 90 per cent more income per pupil per year than state schools in 2022/23, nearly twice as much.

Other studies have estimated the resource gap as larger than this. Green and Kynaston in their 2019 book *Engines of Privilege* (arguing for the abolition of independent schools) estimated that, including boarding schools and independent school income streams other than fees, average independent school resource per pupil is at least three times that of state schools.¹⁰⁰ Notably, however, this estimate includes a large amount of expense that goes into accommodation costs for pupils at boarding schools, and not into education or education related costs.

Another study from Gamsu in 2021 which isolated (predominantly boarding) HMC schools and compared them with state schools local to them found that they had 3.7 times as much mean income per pupil as the state schools that they were compared to.¹⁰¹

The Gamsu study provides a useful illustration as it focused on the HMC – an affluent and historic section of the independent school sector – resulting in a conclusion out of keeping with other evidence. This importantly illustrates the point made in Chapter 1 on the clear differences between the reputation of the sector and ‘typical’ independent schools. The research was valid, but the sample was not reflective of the whole sector.

This resource gap has grown in the last 15 years. The IFS estimate that the funding gap between independent and state schools was £3,500 per pupil per year (in 2023/24 prices) in 2009/10, less than half of what it was in 2022/23.¹⁰²

In percentage terms, the IFS estimate that in 2004/05, independent schools had 40 per cent more funding per pupil per year than state schools. In 2009/10, this was roughly the same, even a small amount lower; by 2014/15, this was up to nearly 80 per cent, and by 2019/20 –

⁹⁹ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023) *Tax, private school fees and state school spending*, Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/IFS-Report-R263-Tax-private-school-fees-and-state-school-spending.pdf> (Accessed: 4 March 2024).

¹⁰⁰ F. Green & D. Kynaston (2019) *Engines of Privilege: Britain's Private School Problem*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

¹⁰¹ Gamsu, S. (2021) *Why are some children worth more than others? The private-state school funding gap in England*. Available at: <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1604286> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

¹⁰² Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023) *Tax, private school fees and state school spending*, Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-07/IFS-Report-R263-Tax-private-school-fees-and-state-school-spending.pdf> (Accessed: 4 March 2024).

at its peak – it had exceeded 100 per cent. In 2022/23 it was back down just below 90 per cent.¹⁰³

All of these figures – including that of the Institute for Fiscal Studies – ignore non-association independent schools. Consequently, it is extremely important that comments on the funding gap between the independent and state schools sector are clear that they relate to ISC schools and the state schools sector, not the entire independent schools sector.

The precise funding gap is unclear, but, when looking to isolate educational funding – such as to compare resource on a like-for-like basis – the IFS estimates are most preferable, suggesting ISC schools have around twice as much funding per pupil as state schools.

Pupil-teacher ratio

A different way that the resource discrepancy between independent and state schools can be estimated is through pupil-teacher ratios, that is, how many pupils there are for each teacher at a school.¹⁰⁴

This is a very good measure of understanding the relative resource of the two sectors as teachers are the largest part of cost for schools and pupils are the largest source of income, meaning that when schools have too little income to cover their costs they often need to increase this ratio, and when they have surplus income they will often decrease it.

DfE data shows that the pupil-teacher ratio in ISC schools is far lower than at state schools, both at a primary and secondary level. They also show that this discrepancy has grown a little over the last decade; state school ratios have slightly increased and independent school ratios have slightly fallen.

For secondary schools, in 2013/14, state schools had a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1, more than 85 per cent higher than the ISC pupil-teacher ratio of 8:1. This gap has grown a little, and in 2023/24, state secondary school ratios of 17:1 were more than twice ISC senior ratios of 8:1.

For primary schools, in 2013/14, state schools had a slightly higher pupil-teacher ratio, almost exactly twice the ISC pupil-teacher ratio. By 2023/24, this gap had grown as ISC ratios had fallen, whilst state school ratios have risen a little and are now 126 per cent higher than in ISC primary schools.

In total, the gap rose from 84 per cent in 2013/14 to 106 per cent in 2023/24.

It is important to note that this independent school data also excludes non-association independent schools; schools which are generally estimated to be much less well-resourced than association independent schools and are also much smaller, as in Chapter 1.3. As such, when looking at the independent school sector as a whole, the picture is much less clear.

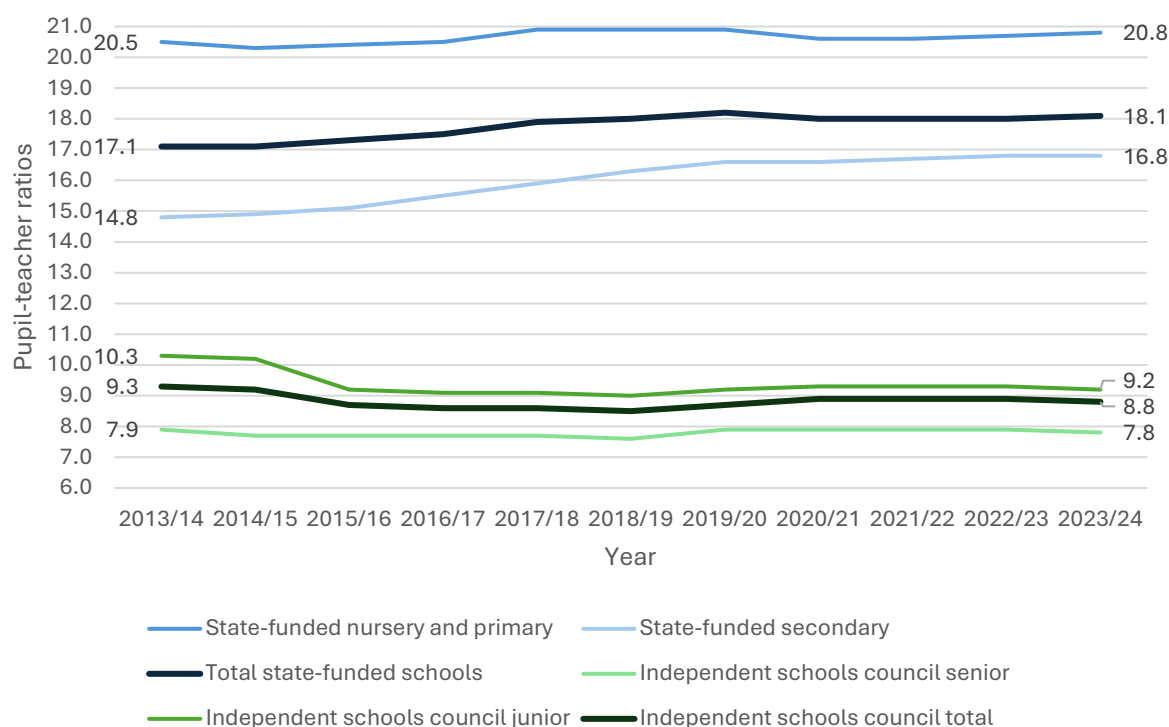
¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ To give an example, a school with 500 pupils and 50 teachers would have a pupil-teacher ratio of 10:1.

One would estimate that the gap is still significant but much smaller, but there is a clear lack of good data.

This said, between the ISC and state schools, we see a very similar picture to that of per-pupil funding, with ISC schools having half as many pupils for each teacher on average.

Figure 4.1: Pupils per teacher (pupil-teacher ratio) in state-funded and Independent Schools Council (ISC) schools, 2013/14-2023/24



Source: For state schools: Department for Education (2023) *School workforce in England*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england> (Accessed: 4 March 2024). For ISC schools: Independent Schools Council (2011-2023), *Annual census*, 2011-2023 editions, Available at: <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/annual-census/> (Accessed: 4 March 2024). Note: ISC figures are for calendar years and DfE figures are for academic years, and nurseries are not included in considerations throughout this report, but are included in the official Department for Education data.

Impact of class sizes on academic outcomes

The impact of class sizes on academic outcomes is disputed, although the literature is generally fairly sceptical of the overall impact, especially when considering the high cost of small class sizes.

In the book *Much Promise*, Barnaby Lenon writes:

*‘It has long been shown that there is no good correlation between class sizes and results’.*¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Lenon, B. (2017) *Much Promise: Successful Schools in England*, John Catt Educational Ltd., Melton., p19.

International comparison research from McKinsey in 2007¹⁰⁶ and 2010¹⁰⁷ argued that decreasing class sizes is ineffective and expensive as a method for improving the education of pupils. They argued that one reason for this is that reducing class sizes requires schools to employ more teachers, which, considering the limited supply of good quality teachers, can increase the number of low-quality teachers at schools. They argued that it is better for your child to be in a large class with an excellent teacher than a small class with a weak teacher. This potentially adds to the severity of the 'brain drain' concern around high-quality teachers moving to the independent schools sector.

PISA research has suggested that small class sizes do not raise standards, in particular highlighting that some of the top countries for school standards have very large class sizes.¹⁰⁸

The Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit argues that reducing class sizes by 10 pupils has a positive impact of around two months more progress per pupil in a year on average.¹⁰⁹ They do also argue that there is some evidence for additional benefits of smaller class sizes with younger children. Overall, they rank it as an improvement that is small in effect and high in cost.¹¹⁰

There is some US evidence supporting the beneficial effect of small class sizes. Finn and Achilles (1990) studied 12,000 students in Tennessee between 1985 and 1989 and found that small class sizes did improve academic attainment, in particular for students of an ethnic minority, suggesting small class sizes can reduce the attainment gap.¹¹¹ A study on a similar programme in California with a much larger sample of 1.8 million students found that, all else being equal, reducing class sizes by 10 students raised the percentage of third grade students that exceed median test scores by about four percentage points in mathematics and three percentage points in reading.¹¹²

One significant disadvantage that smaller class sizes can have is that, for the same number of teachers in a school, teachers have to spend more time in front of pupils and have less time for preparation and professional development, meaning that smaller class sizes can lower the quality of teaching.¹¹³ The alternative of course is lowering class sizes through the highly expensive process of lowering pupil-teacher ratios across the school.

¹⁰⁶ McKinsey & Company (2007) *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*, Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-the-worlds-best-performing-school-systems-come-out-on-top> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ OECD (2014) *PISA 2012 Results: Students and Money (Volume VI): Financial Literacy Skills for the 21st Century*. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264208094-en> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

¹⁰⁹ Education Endowment Foundation, *Reducing class size*, Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/reducing-class-size> (Accessed: 3 April 2024)

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Finn and Achilles (1990) *Answers and questions about class size: A statewide experiment*, American Education Research Journal, p27.

¹¹² Jepson and Rikvin (2002) *Class Size Reduction, Teacher Quality, and Academic Achievement in California Public Elementary Schools*, Public Policy Institute of California.

¹¹³ Stevenson and Stigler (1992) *The Learning Gap: why our schools are failing and what we can learn from Japanese and Chinese education*. Summit Books.

Evidence from *Much Promise* suggests that the larger class sizes in China and Japan compared with schools in the USA result in teachers in Japan having almost nine fewer contact hours per week than in the USA. This is suggested as part of the reason for a higher standard of teaching.¹¹⁴

Domestically, research from Sullivan and Heath (2002) found that although independent schools do perform better than state schools even when controlling for prior attainment and socioeconomic characteristics of students, that ‘the student-teacher ratio had no effect on test scores or examination results’.¹¹⁵

In general, the existing research suggests that the effect of class sizes on academic development depends on the nature of the differences (for example there are more academic gains in shrinking class sizes from 40 to 20 than from 30 to 10), the age of the students (the effect is larger for younger students), the socioeconomic status of the students (the effect is larger for disadvantaged students) and the subject matter (for example small class sizes seem to matter more for reading than arithmetic).¹¹⁶

The independent-state qualification gap

Another divide in resource between the independent and state school sectors is in the qualifications of teachers. It is worth noting that part of why qualifications vary is that independent school teachers (and Academy school teachers) do not need to have QTS, local authority school teachers do.

This area lacks recent data, however 2015 research from the Sutton Trust found that:

‘Of all teachers, independent school teachers are almost twice as likely to have been awarded a BEd¹¹⁷ from Oxbridge; three times as likely to have been awarded a Bachelor’s; over three times as likely to have been awarded a PGCE¹¹⁸; and over four times as likely to have been awarded a Master’s.’¹¹⁹

They did note that this gap had shrunk significantly between 2003 and 2015, which suggests that it may have further narrowed since, but there was still a stark divide in the qualification levels of independent and state school teachers.

Other data, highlighted in research by the Social Market Foundation in 2014, found that independent school teachers in mathematics, modern languages, physics and chemistry

¹¹⁴ Lenon, B. (2017) *Much Promise: Successful Schools in England*, John Catt Educational Ltd. Melton., p16.

¹¹⁵ Sullivan, A. and Heath, A. (2002) *State and private schools in England and Wales*. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/State-and-Private-Schools-in-England-and-Wales-Sullivan-Heath/c947bbb267eachdf2cf9478fd2906da28a6f065c> (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

¹¹⁶ Lenon, B. (2017) *Much Promise: Successful Schools in England*, John Catt Educational Ltd. Melton., p69.

¹¹⁷ Bachelor of Education, an undergraduate degree that also gives Qualified Teacher Status.

¹¹⁸ Postgraduate Certificate in Education, a higher education teacher training qualification.

¹¹⁹ Kirby, P. (2015) *Teaching by Degrees*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Teaching-by-Degrees-1.pdf> (Accessed: 14 March 2024).

were between 15 and 30 per cent more likely to have a specialist degree in the subject that they were teaching.¹²⁰

It is worth noting that the qualification gap does not imply these individuals are better at teaching.

The independent-state parental involvement gap

The other structural gap between the independent and state schools is that independent schools have a direct income dependency on private investment (almost all of which is from their parents) that state schools do not have, making them more accountable to parents. This would be expected to result in a higher level of parent-school engagement in the independent sector.

On the other hand, there is arguably more of an expectation in independent schools from parents paying the schools to educate their children, who therefore see their own individual role as reduced, or to some extent delegated.

This is not an immediately straightforward issue to measure. However, extensive polling from ParentKind's National Parent Survey,¹²¹ which asked over 5,000 parents, including nearly 400 independent school parents, a range of questions on school engagement which helps illuminate this.

Their evidence presents a clear picture of independent school parents being more likely to directly engage with their children's school. The difference is not vast, but is reasonably large.¹²² It does not, however, provide evidence to suggest more at-home support from independent school parents than from state school parents.¹²³

¹²⁰ Seldon, A. (2014) Schools United: Ending the divide between independent and state. Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Publication-Schools-United-Ending-the-divide-between-independent-and-state-Anthony-Seldon.pdf> (Accessed: 8 March 2024).

¹²¹ ParentKind (2024), *The National Parent Survey 2023*, Available at: <https://www.nationalparentsurvey.com/> (Accessed: 8 March 2024).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

4.2 State school income

Average state school income is an estimated £7,690 per pupil for 2024/25.¹²⁴

State school funding is both simple and complicated; the formula for state school funding is simple and intuitive, but the actual funding received at a school level is complicated and localised.

The **National Funding Formula** (NFF) is set out by the DfE, but it is followed to differing extents by **local authorities who still set their own local funding formula for schools**.¹²⁵

State school income is becoming simpler each year as the DfE are tightening their control of school funding. Local authorities are gradually being made to fund schools according to the National Funding Formula, set by the DfE. This has already happened to a large extent, and is continuing each year.¹²⁶

Of the 150 local authorities in England, 107 mirrored the National Funding Formula in 2023-24, meaning that their local funding formulae for schooling is all within 2.5 per cent of the National Funding Formula values.¹²⁷ The other 43 are required to move at least a further 10 per cent closer in 2024-25.¹²⁸

To look at state school funding at a local authority level would yield very little extra insight beyond that which is displayed in the National Funding Formula – it would only inform us of a number of small geographic discrepancies which are likely to disappear in the next few years. Consequently, the rest of this analysis will assume that, over the medium- to long-term, we can approximate state school funding as being administered according to the National Funding Formula.

The National Funding Formula

The National Funding Formula is intuitive and reasonably simple.

Pupil-led funding

The vast majority of school funding is per-pupil funding (93.5 per cent), in an entitlement system where each pupil is allocated a certain amount of money that can be used at any school. All of the below is annual funding.

- **Basic per-pupil funding:** Most school funding (75.7 per cent) is given at a basic rate for all pupils. All schools receive flat funding per pupil that all pupils at that age group are worth. In 2024-25, this will be £3,562 for pupils in Reception to Year 6; £5,022 for pupils in Year 7 to Year 9, and £5,661 for pupils in Years 10 and 11.

¹²⁴ UK Government (2024) *School funding statistics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-funding-statistics> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

¹²⁵ Department for Education (2024) *School funding: Everything you need to know*. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/03/19/school-funding-everything-you-need-to-know/> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

¹²⁶ Department for Education (2023) *The national funding formulae for schools and high needs 2024-25*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/651d2587bef21800156ded01/National_funding_formula_for_schools_and_high_needs_2024_to_2025.pdf (Accessed: 17 September 2024) p8.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p37.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p8.

- **Additional needs funding:** A further 17.8 per cent of school funding is additional needs funding. This is additional funding for pupils that are more costly to educate. For each additional need a pupil has, they receive an additional lump-sum amount. Additional needs are split into four groups: deprivation, Low Prior Attainment, English as an Additional Language and Mobility.

School-led funding

The other 6.5 per cent of school funding is school-led. This is a lump-sum to all schools of £134,400 (accounting for 6.3 per cent) and then some additional ‘sparsity’ funding for small and remote schools, alongside some other school-led funding details, together accounting for 0.2 per cent of school income.

Geography and protection funding

As is intuitive, once these numbers have been calculated, an **area cost adjustment** (ACA) is applied as a multiplier to school allocations to reflect the additional costs of running a school in some areas of the country. This is mostly due to differences in salary costs.

Finally, there is protection funding. All this means is that there are two safeguards for school funding: there is a **minimum per-pupil level** all schools must receive, and there is a **funding floor** to ensure that schools receive a minimum year-on-year (pupil-led) funding increase.

It is worth noting that all the above percentages given exclude the funding floor and premises adjustments, which account for an additional approximately 1.9 per cent of the total National Funding Formula allocation.

Summary

In summation:

- Almost all state school funding, 93.5 per cent, is per-pupil funding, with each pupil having a specific funding allocation according to a basic rate plus a lump sum for each additional need they have.
- The vast majority of the rest of state school funding is a lump sum (£134,400 for 2024-25) paid to all schools.
- These numbers are then subject to an area cost adjustment according to salary costs in different parts of England and two safeguards: a minimum per-pupil funding level and a minimum year-on-year increase.

This is similar to a voucher system of state school funding as each pupil has a defined allocation of funding that they can use at whatever state school they attend. This allocation is adjusted according to the cost of educating the pupil (through additional needs funding).

Due to the fact that there is no *actual* voucher, however, it is better understood as an ‘entitlement’ system. This is the term used hereon.

These entitlements are what define school income, plus a small lump sum all schools receive, and a minimum per-pupil protection.

4.3 Independent school income

The large majority of an independent school's income is derived from fees. There are no aggregate estimates for the level of 'fee dependency' in the independent schools sector, but our consultation suggests that for many independent schools it is in the region of 95 to 98 per cent. For roughly average ISC schools with an income of £4 million (circa 220-250 pupils at £16,000-£18,000 annual fee) this would correspond to non-fee income of £80,000-£200,000 each year.

This means that although most of the 'independent school funding formula' relates to pricing strategy – schools deciding what fee will maximise their income – it is important to also evaluate existing non-fee income streams that schools have.

Affordability and pricing strategy

Perhaps the most well-documented strategic challenge that the independent sector faces is affordability. We have seen already that high independent school fees pose a number of challenges to the independent sector and to schooling in England.

They pose a replicability challenge, as shown in Chapter 2, as the sector's ability to drive high standards in the wider school system is limited by how feasible it is for state schools to replicate their practice; they pose an accessibility challenge, as shown in Chapter 3, as the sector is unaffordable and inaccessible for most families; and they pose a fairness challenge, as we have seen in this chapter, as the sector receives much more income per pupil than state schools. This is expanded on in Chapter 5.

We will also see that they pose a reputational challenge in Chapter 6 as a lack of affordability leads to a sector which is viewed as exclusive and elitist by the public and as unfair by many politicians.

Related to and somewhat separate from these challenges is the business question of pricing strategy. Independent schools derive their income principally from fees, so need to set these fees wisely in order to remain viable and sustainable.

Upwards price pressure: 'income for money'

One of the things that is less intuitive is that, as well as having significant demand pressure to lower their fees, independent schools also face demand pressure to raise their fees. (It is worth noting that the profit incentive is not a demand pressure and that a large majority of independent schools are not for-profit.)

This is because independent schools compete with state schooling that they have pre-paid for (through taxation) and therefore free at point of entry. They also of course cannot exempt their parents from having to pay for state schools through taxation.

This means that independent schools have to be sufficiently more appealing than their state school competition to be worth the fees. In most contexts this leads to what can be called an 'income for money' upwards price pressure.

Under a quarter of ISC schools charge less than £13,000 a year, meaning that three quarters are charging at least £5,000 a year more than most state schools are receiving in annual per-pupil income.¹²⁹

The concept of ‘income for money’ is the idea that parents who are spending money on their children’s schooling at an independent school want the school their child attends to have more income to show for it. The ‘income for money’ can be defined as the amount of extra income schools have as a result of parent’s paying, expressed as a percentage of the fee paid.

To give an example, at fees of less than £8,000 a year, a parent is paying to send their child to a school that has less income than the state school that they could send their child to without paying; the ‘income for money’ is negative. At fees of £10,000 a year (compared against a state school receiving £8,000 a year per pupil), the school has an income of £2,000 (20 per cent) more per pupil – we could call that 20 per cent ‘income for money’. At fees of £16,000 a year, the school has an income of £8,000 more per pupil, an ‘income for money’ of 50 per cent.

This is of course not how parents choose schools, but there is a significant effect that parents generally want something to show for their large investment in their child’s schooling and do not want to spend a large amount of money sending their children to an underfunded school.

Distinctiveness and specialist schools

This income-for-money effect is much less clear for specialist schools.

For specialist schools, which account for many of the 25 per cent of ISC schools that charge under £13,000 a year, and for most non-association independent schools, ‘income for money’ does not accurately describe the parent decision making process or pricing strategy, with the key theme instead being distinctiveness. This is most clear when looking at Muslim and Jewish independent schools, but is also true for some Christian schools and for distinct educational philosophies (Montessori or Steiner, for example) as well.

These schools provide an education much more valuable to their parents than state schooling through the character and ethos of the school, instead of through achieving a higher standard at performing the same or similar operations to state schools. They also, due to targeting highly specific groups, cannot charge high fees as their demand base is already quite small, and they would simply not be viable. For both of these reasons, these schools tend to be much more inexpensive.

¹²⁹ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024) and UK Government (2024) *School funding statistics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-funding-statistics> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

Other income streams

As noted, consultees estimated that most independent schools are between 95 and 98 per cent ‘fee dependent’. In part due to this, many were highly focused on other income streams.

The independent sector’s viability is currently closely tied to fees. If fees are too high to generate demand – or too low to generate demand – then independent schools lose their viability. Similarly, if fees do not cover costs, many independent schools do not have alternatives for significant income raising. Many consultees highlighted a need for proactive strategy by the sector here.

‘Fees are lazy, fees are about, what can we squeeze out of them? Instead of, what can we do with our assets? It’s our assets we should be squeezing, not our parents. So, I think there is more to do in the education of the sector towards that’ – Expert witness.

This issue, as with so many in this area, is radically different for different schools within the independent sector. Consultees referred to ‘public schools’ – an historic term used loosely to mean asset rich schools with a well-known name – having more opportunity to diversify income than smaller independent schools, especially prep schools. This is clear evaluating other income streams.

Four other income streams: Expertise, facilities, brand, donations

Consultees mostly referred to four income streams other than fees (there was discussion of ways to increase fee income other than raising fees), and raised a number of points as to why all of these were much easier for large, famous independent schools to do. It is worth noting that extensions such as extending year groups, starting nurseries and moving from single-sex to coeducational are considered extensions of the primary – fee – income stream.

Monetising expertise

The first income stream that independent schools can generate other than fees is through monetising expertise. This has two arms: the first was through consultancy services and the second was extra-curricular offering: online and in-person academic clubs as well as sport, music, art, drama and other clubs that schools can offer to the local community to generate income.

Monetising facilities

The second income stream, extremely closely related to monetising expertise, was monetising facilities. Together they can be understood as ‘monetising assets’. Facilities (such as classrooms, astros, pools, studios, halls) can be rented out when they are not used – especially during weekends, evenings and school holidays to generate a steady income stream for schools. The capacity for this correlates positively with school size in a literal

physical sense: the more facilities a school has, the greater the possibility of monetising them.

Monetising assets, taken as one, was a point of contestation for consultees as these were also viewed as **partnership opportunities**. This represented a clear trade-off to schools; where commercial incentives were at odds with partnering ethos.

Admittedly, to view these as wholly opposed was highlighted as reductive. A number of consultees argued that the strongest partnerships are administered with a coherent business approach. However, some tension between the two was stressed.

Monetising brand

The other significant income streams schools can generate is through the monetising of the brand, and the allowing of others to use the school brand at a price.

The clearest example of this is international franchising – where schools establish partner schools in foreign countries to generate an income stream, spread their ethos and improve their international reputation and long-term applicant pool – is a strategy for diversifying income but is unrealistic for the large majority of independent schools. Consultees noted that it required the school brand to hold significant value, and relied on the administrative capacity within the school to sustain an international partnership.

Donations and legacies

Similarly, generating significant income streams from alumni donations and legacies (that is, gifts to the schools from people's wills) is very hard for junior schools – as pupils tend to associate more closely with their senior schools – and takes a very long time to establish, especially for schools which opened recently. Consultees noted that a strong sense of identity and significant time investment into a close alumni network is an area where schools can do more of this, but that this remains long-term and difficult for junior schools and schools that do not have spare administrative capacity.

Another sometimes lucrative income stream is investment of permanent endowments. A number of old, famous independent schools have significant endowments and can generate sometimes millions of pounds annually worth of returns through investing these assets. This income stream is another that is largely unrealistic for most independent schools. The concept of a small operating surplus being put into an investment fund by schools in order to protect themselves from risk associated with fluctuating demand is possible for many independent schools, but consultees noted that to do this in a way that was worth the administrative and financial cost is not straightforward.

There are alternatives to these options, including corporate sponsorship and summer schooling. Consultees, however, did not particularly discuss these avenues.

In summation, there are interesting and sensible avenues that schools can and do take to diversify and stabilise their income, but none of these could accurately be described as 'silver bullets'. They are generally reasonably difficult ways of generating quite small amounts of income.

4.4 Summary

- The state school funding system is mostly based on per-pupil entitlements, where schools receive a specific allocation according to each pupil. Independent schools funding is mostly based in fees.
- ISC schools have roughly twice as much resource per pupil as state schools, up from around 40 per cent more 15 years ago. The amount of resource non-association independent schools have is not clear.
- Most of this discrepancy seems to be accounted for in significantly different pupil-teacher ratios – state school pupil-teacher ratios are 106 per cent higher than ISC pupil-teacher ratios. This is something that the evidence suggests has a reasonably small impact, with an effect slightly larger for large classes, younger students and disadvantaged students.¹³⁰
- Alongside the intuitive downwards demand pressure of remaining affordable, many independent schools face a significant upwards demand pressure on fees in terms of an ‘income for money’ effect. This is where parents want the money that they are spending to be realised in higher per-pupil income for the schools. This is less true for specialist schools.
- Independent schools strongly desire more diversified income, but this is difficult to achieve practically for many independent schools as the main additional income streams depend on significant assets, a valuable brand or a strong alumni network.

¹³⁰ Lenon, B. (2017) *Much Promise: Successful Schools in England*. John Catt Educational Ltd. Melton., p69.

Chapter 5.

The independent and state school sectors: Outcomes

Having evaluated incomes, this brings the Commission to comparing the outcomes of the independent and state school sectors, respectively. It is split into two sections – the first half focuses on pupil outcomes and the second half on cross-sector partnerships.

The performance of state and independent schools is first analysed by looking at raw academic grades. Next, we evaluate the value-add of independent schools – that is, the extent to which independently-educated pupils perform better at GCSE and A-level when controlling for previous performance and socioeconomic characteristics. Finally, we consider these outcomes into and out of university, looking at the long-term outcomes of independently educated individuals.

We then return to the persistent theme of partnerships, a theme discussed in Chapter 2. This part briefly examines which are the most common forms of cross-sector partnership, highlights some examples of excellent practice in particular areas of partnership activity and looks at the incidence of partnership work in the state sector. There is also discussion about the definition, measurement, targeting and scalability of partnership work.

Chapter summary

The independent-state performance gap

- **Performance comparison:** Measured outcomes are available in Key Stage (KS) 4 and KS5. At GCSE, 47 per cent of independent school GCSE grades in 2023 were grade 7 or higher, compared with 19 per cent at secondary comprehensive schools, 20 per cent at Free schools, 21 per cent at Academies and 59 per cent at secondary selective schools.¹³¹ At A-Level, in 2023, 75 of the top 100 schools for getting A* and A grades were independent schools and the average grade is a B+, compared to an average of a C+ at state schools.
- **Value-add impact:** There have been a number of studies into the value-add of independent schools. These vary but suggest that, even controlling for socioeconomic context, pupils gain an advantage of several grades across their best eight GCSEs at independent schools, and a further grade or two across their A-Levels above what they would be expected to achieve at a state school.

The relationship between the state and independent school sectors

- **Partnership:** There is a large amount of independent-state school partnership, with the ISC annual census reporting at least 9,248 partnership activities in the last year. The nature of partnership activities, or extent of state school involvement, is not especially clear due to difficulties in reporting.
- **Case studies:** Although there are many exceptional partnerships, four case studies were especially highlighted in our consultation: King Edward VI Foundation in Birmingham, Lumina Tutoring, Eton X and Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF)
- **Challenges:** Consultees highlighted three major challenges to partnership activity: the lack of organised reporting, the lack of state school participation and the lack of coordination, especially with geographic unevenness.

¹³¹ Ofqual. *GCSE outcomes by centre type*. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/GCSE/CentreType/> (Accessed: 2 April 2024).

5.1 The independent-state performance gap

The impact independent schools have on pupil attainment is not straightforward to measure since much of what independent schools market is a ‘holistic’ education, whereby students are taught well across extra-curricular, as well as curricular, pursuits. This means that academic measures most likely underestimate the advantage of an independent school education.

They do not capture, for example, the extremely high standard of sport at many independent schools, although this is discussed with the brief look at Olympic Medal winners.

Unadjusted academic performance comparison

Independent school pupils tend to perform better in examinations than state school pupils. We call this the unadjusted gap as it does not control for the other advantages independent school pupils have, such as generally being from more affluent backgrounds.

GCSE results are more difficult to compare across sectors, as many independent schools take international GCSEs (iGCSEs) which are not included in the statistics. That said, the independent-state gap is still extremely clear in GCSEs, other than when compared with secondary selective state schools who perform better. Forty-seven per cent of independent school GCSE grades in 2023 were 7 or higher, compared with 19 per cent at secondary comprehensive schools, 20 per cent at Free schools, 21 per cent at Academies and 59 per cent at secondary selective schools.¹³²

There are only 163 selective state-funded (grammar) schools in England, and they perform very well at GCSE.¹³³

As Figure 5.1 shows, the proportion of independent school A-Levels that are awarded an A or A* is almost double that of Academies, and over double that of secondary comprehensive schools, with just under half (49.4 per cent) of grades being awarded either an A or an A*. They achieve over three times the proportion of As and A*s that further education establishments do.

Secondary selective schools, although a long way ahead of Academies or comprehensive schools, have a lower proportion of As and A*s at A-Level (41.0 per cent) than independent schools (49.4 per cent). These observations have remained roughly consistent in the last six years.

¹³² Ibid.

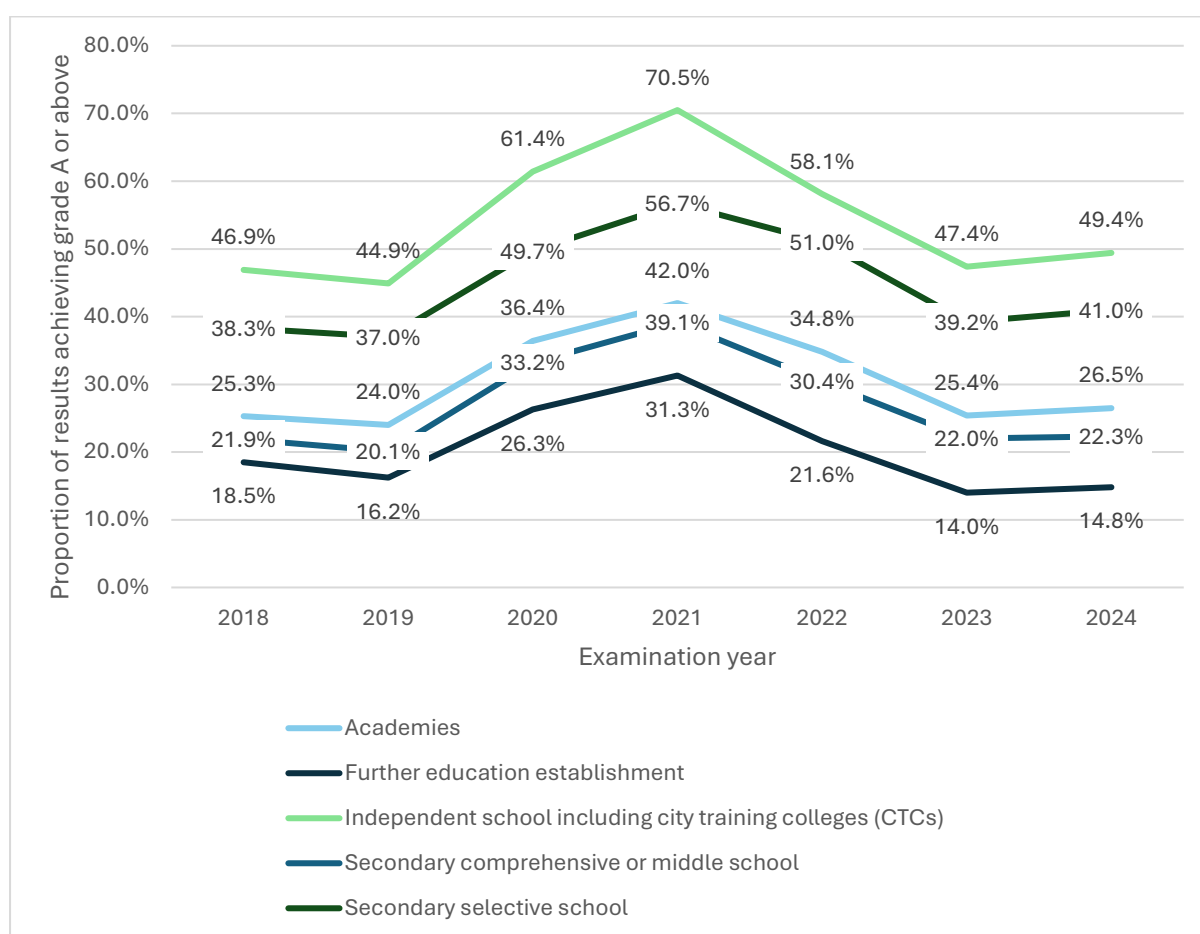
¹³³ UK Government (2024) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed 17 June 2024).

Of the top 100 schools in the country by average A-Level result in 2023 as ranked by the Department for Education, 75 were independent schools, even though they account for just a fifth of the schools ranked.¹³⁴

Perhaps even more starkly, 65 are HMC schools, of which there are only 288 in the country. The rest of the top 100 constitutes 18 Academy convertors – of which 17 are selective; five Free schools – of which four are 16-19 Free schools; and two voluntary aided schools.¹³⁵

Similarly, 29 of the 80 schools listed by *The Spectator* in September 2024 as most effective at getting students into Oxbridge were independent schools.¹³⁶

Figure 5.1: Proportion of grades A or above at A-Level by school type, England, 2018-2024



Source: Ofqual (2024) *A level outcomes by centre type*. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/CentreType/> (Accessed: 19 December 2024). Note: All exam results have been significantly affected by the disruption that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, with independent grading across the school system meaning that grades are significantly higher in the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. In 2023,

¹³⁴ Department for Education (2024) *Compare school and college performance in England: All schools and colleges in England*. Available at: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools®ion=all-england&for=16to18> (Accessed: 8 July 2024).

¹³⁵ Department for Education (2024) *Compare school and college performance in England: All schools and colleges in England*. Available at: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/schools-by-type?step=default&table=schools®ion=all-england&for=16to18> (Accessed: 8 July 2024).

¹³⁶ The Spectator (2024) *Which schools get the most pupils into Oxbridge?* Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/which-schools-get-the-most-pupils-in/> (Accessed: 28 October 2024).

results were back to being similar to that of 2019. ('Independent schools' refers to both association and non-association independent schools.)

This discrepancy can also be seen examining average point scores (APS) per A-Level from state school and independent school pupils. APS provide a continuous indicator of A-Level performance by groups of pupils. Each grade is 10 points: A*s are 60 points, As 50, Bs 40, Cs 30, Ds 20 and Es 10.¹³⁷ A score of 46 would be an A- and a score of 44 would be a B+.

According to this measure, in 2022/23 examinations, the average APS across all state-funded schools was 34.86, a C+. The average across all independent schools was 42.82, a B+, for a difference of 8.04, or 0.804 grades.¹³⁸

Value-add impact of independent schools

Many studies have looked to isolate the specific impact of independent schooling on outcomes for children, taking into account things like the previous academic achievement and the socioeconomic context of the pupils. This work has focussed on outcomes at the end of primary school, at GCSE and at A-Level.

The four studies that this report focuses on paint a picture of independent schools having a significant positive impact on children's academic performance, although one that is significantly smaller than the raw gap in results, as independent school pupils tend to be children who would be expected to perform better on average once socioeconomic characteristics are taken into account.

Other studies not included, such as the PISA 2015 test, Dearden et al. (2002), Halsey et al. (1984) and Smith-Woolley et al. (2018), all find similar conclusions of a significant but reasonably small advantage of independent schooling, that is sustained after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics.¹³⁹

Sullivan and Heath (2002)

Sullivan and Heath conducted a study of state and private schools across England and Wales that included measures of students' social backgrounds and cognitive skills. They first noted 'clear differences in the schools' intakes'¹⁴⁰ resulting in an expectation that independently

¹³⁷ Department for Education (2024) *16 to 18 accountability measures: technical guidance*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ba434cc75d30000dca0f9c/16-18_accountability_measures_technical_guidance.pdf (Accessed: 8 March 2024).

¹³⁸ Department for Education (2024) *A level and other 16 to 18 results*, Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results#dataBlock-33683a6e-efe7-4a9c-83a3-110bd9793fa5-tables> (Accessed: 8 March 2024).

¹³⁹ OECD (2015) *PISA 2015 Results*. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264266490-en.pdf?expires=1712142586&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=11D1D806AED99133217C9154ED2C8008> (Accessed: 3 April 2024); Dearden, L., Ferri, J. and Meghir, C. (2002), *The Effect of School Quality on Educational Attainment and Wages*, Review of Economics and Statistics, 84, 1-20; Halsey, A.H., Heath, A.F. and Ridge, A.M. (1984), *The political Arithmetic of Public Schools*, in Walford (1984). *The British Public School: Policy and Practice*. Farmer Press. London. Smith-Woolley, E. et al. (2018), *Differences in exam performance between pupils attending selective and non-selective schools mirror the genetic differences between them*, Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41539-018-0019-8.pdf> (Accessed: 4 March 2024).

¹⁴⁰ Sullivan, A. and Heath, A. (2002) *State and private schools in England and Wales*. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/State-and-Private-Schools-in-England-and-Wales-Sullivan-Heath/c947bbb267eachdf2cf9478fd2906da28a6f065c> (Accessed: 7 March 2024).

educated pupils would perform better due to socioeconomic and family characteristics. They also found that academically selective direct-grant schools (the focus on direct-grant schools was due to using older data) had ‘a greater proportion of very able students than the independent schools.’¹⁴¹

Their results found that even when controlling for parents’ education, sex, family structure, number of children in household, parental employment, mother’s reading behaviour and school resources, independent schools still performed significantly better than secondary modern or comprehensive schools, but not significantly better than direct-grant schools.

As discussed, the research also found that although ‘independent schools had the lowest average student-teacher ratios’, that ‘the student-teacher ratio, on which independent schools were especially advantaged, appeared to have no effect on either test scores or examination results.’¹⁴² The results were similarly unsupportive of the effect of school resource in general.

Ndaji et al. (2016)

Similarly to this, a study from Durham University in 2016 evaluated pupils’ academic standard at ages four, eight, 10 and 16 (GCSEs) and looked at the impact of school type on performance.¹⁴³ They found that:

‘The difference between independent and state schools in the average of best 8 GCSEs was just under 2 GCSE grades based on the mean of three cohorts. However, when the prior academic ability, deprivation, student’s gender, single sex and compositional variable were taken into account, the difference between the two sectors was 0.64 GCSE grades.’¹⁴⁴

This progress of 0.64 GCSE grades per GCSE, controlling for various factors, accounts for a difference in attainment of just over five grades in total across a pupil’s best eight GCSE grades, which they estimated as about two additional years of schooling by the age of 16.

The study found that according to international PISA outcomes, this would have moved the UK’s PISA results from that year to be above the highest European performers such as Finland, Switzerland or the Netherlands, if the same value-add was seen in the state sector.

Parsons (2017)

Focusing on the primary school level, a study from Parsons in 2017 looked at the impact of independent primary education on the cognitive performance of children at the end of primary school. This was done for three generations of children, born in 1958, 1970 and 2000/01.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ndaji, F. et al. (2016) *A comparison of Academic Achievement in Independent and State Schools*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/3140/16_02_26-cem-durham-university-academic-value-added-research.pdf (Accessed: 4 March 2024).

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

This study used more controls than the Durham University study, including birth weight, position in birth order, behaviour problems, ethnicity, family class through highest occupation of either parent, parental education, home ownership, the ratio of people in their household per room and frequency of reading to the child.

Even with this extensive set of control variables, the study found that independent primary education has a significant positive effect on children's educational outcomes at a primary school level. For the 1970 cohort, reading performance increased by 23 percentile points from attending independent school and maths performance moved up 24 percentile points. When adjusting for all of the control variables, these effects were eight percentile points and nine percentile points, respectively.

One issue with this study is that the results are now quite old, and the value-add of 50 years ago may not be representative of today.

Henderson et al. (2019)

Further research from University College London in 2019 studied the question of the impact of independent school attainment at 18, specifically with respect to which A-Level subjects were chosen, how well students performed at them and whether, controlling for subject choice and grades achieved, there was an independent school advantage in university admissions.¹⁴⁵

In principle, university prospects are a better measure of school quality as they incorporate careers and higher education advice as well as co-curricular and holistic education into the measure of a student's outcomes.

They found that, when controlling for social class, parental education, equivalised permanent income, housing tenure, ethnicity, gender and GCSE performance, independent school A-Level pupils take 27 per cent more A-Levels than the Russell Group universities describe as 'facilitating' A-Levels and far fewer 'less effective preparation' A-Levels (indicating how highly the universities value each A-Level).¹⁴⁶

This demonstrates a cultural point that independent schools are more likely to offer A-Levels that top universities value more highly. This is arguably in part due to independent schooling being an investment product, as in Chapter 2.2, where parents are purchasing better university prospects for their children.

With these same controls, they found that independent school pupils gain a significant advantage through school type in their A-levels as compared with state schools. This advantage was larger for more 'facilitating' and 'useful' A-Levels than it was for 'more

¹⁴⁵ Henderson, M. et al. (2019) *Private schooling, subject choice and upper secondary attainment and progression to university*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/03054985.2019.1669551?needAccess=true> (Accessed: 4 March 2024).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

limited suitability' A-Levels, further suggesting a greater focus on these subjects at independent schools.

For 'facilitating' A-Levels, it was an 11 percentage points rise up the rankings, equivalent to the difference between an ABB and an AAA student. Overall, it was slightly smaller, at eight percentage points.¹⁴⁷

Looking at university admissions, they found that, taking the number of A-levels, A-level performance and A-level choice into account, independent school pupils are only six per cent more likely to attend university at all but not significantly more likely to attend a Russell Group university.¹⁴⁸ This could be interpreted to suggest that universities do not favour independently educated students, and that instead, independently educated students are simply more likely to perform well at A-levels that universities value more highly.

Discussion

It is not possible to know the exact advantage, but the picture suggests that pupils gain an advantage of several grades across their best eight GCSEs at independent schools, and a further grade or two across their A-levels above what they would be expected to achieve at a state school.

This research simultaneously supports the quality and social value of the independent schools sector – as the evidence suggests that these schools do perform better – and the criticism of unfairness – as, if the schools do perform better, then children are receiving an advantage by going to these better schools. This does provide evidential weight to the sector perceiving itself in terms of performance, as in Chapter 2.

Preserving uncommon subjects

Another academic note which was discussed in Chapter 2 was the independent sector's ability to preserve and maintain standards in uncommon subjects. There is strong ISC evidence here where we see that over 20 per cent of A-Level entries in modern languages (Spanish, French, German and 'others'), classical studies, further maths, music, drama and theatre studies and economics are from students at ISC schools.¹⁴⁹ These are – as noted in the Henderson et al. research – subjects that Russell Group universities view as 'facilitating'.

Post-school destinations in the independent and state sectors

Post-school destinations over the very long-term can be evaluated by looking at data for top professions and analysing the schooling background of those in them. In 2019, the Sutton Trust undertook a large study of top professionals across different industries in the UK and found that the independently educated were far more likely to be in 'elite' positions.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

In particular, over 40 per cent of senior judges, lords, diplomats, junior ministers and newspaper columnists were independently educated. In summary, they stated that while seven per cent of the UK school population were at independent schools (or approximately 10 per cent of secondary school pupils)¹⁵⁰ 39 per cent of ‘the elite’ were independently educated for most of their secondary school career.¹⁵¹

It is worth noting that this result has a significant time lag associated with it. For example, 76 per cent of court judges and 72 per cent of tribunal judges are over 50 and so left school over 30 years ago.¹⁵² This is even more pertinent for the House of Lords, where the average age of peers is 70.¹⁵³

This means that this evidence more closely reflects the independent sector several decades ago, which may be different to how it is today.

Olympic Gold Medal Winners 2012, 2016, 2021 and 2024

One small but illuminating way we can evaluate both the range of offering at independent schools and the post-school destinations of (some) independently educated young people is in the secondary schooling of British Gold Medal winners in the 2012, 2016, 2021 and 2024 Olympic Games.

Of the 135 GB athletes who won a gold medal in at least one of those four Olympics,¹⁵⁴ 44 (33 per cent) are known to have attended an independent school and, of those, 40 (91 per cent) attended HMC schools.¹⁵⁵

The proportion of GB gold medal winners who went to independent schools was at least 26 per cent in all five Olympics, and in all five Olympics, the vast majority of independently-educated gold medal winners had attended HMC schools (91 per cent in 2012, 88 per cent in 2016, 78 per cent in 2021, and 92 per cent in 2024, respectively).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ There are 336,907 ISC secondary school pupils (p31 of the 2023 ISC census) and 3,646,079 state-funded secondary school pupils. This, combined with the fact that 14.1 per cent of independent school pupils are not in the ISC suggests around 10 per cent of secondary school pupils are independently educated. UK Government (2023) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> and Independent Schools Council (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

¹⁵¹ UK Government. *Ministers*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/ministers> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

¹⁵² Ministry of Justice (2020) *Diversity of the judiciary: Legal professions, new appointments and current post-holders*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/918529/diversity-of-the-judiciary-2020-statistics-web.pdf (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

¹⁵³ House of Lords (2020) *House of Lords in 2020: Profile of Membership*. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2020-0050/LLN-2020-0050.pdf> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

¹⁵⁴ For lists of individual athletes/Great Britain teams who won gold medals at 2020 Olympics, please see: Olympics (2021) *Great Britain's Tokyo 2020 Olympics medal winners - the final list*. Available at: <https://olympics.com/en/news/great-britain-tokyo-2020-olympics-medals> (Accessed: 28 March 2024). For 2016, see: Adams, T. (2016) *Olympics Rio 2016: All Great Britain's 67 medals – which sports and athletes were most successful?* Available at: https://www.eurosport.com/olympics/rio/2016/olympics-rio-2016-all-great-britain-s-66-medals-which-sports-were-most-successful_sto5733313/story.shtml (Accessed: 28 March 2024). For 2012, see: Nakrami, S. and Steinberg, J. (2016) ‘Team GB’s 29 gold medals from London 2012: where are those Olympians now?’, *The Guardian*, 2 August. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2016/aug/02/team-gb-gold-medals-london-2012-where-are-olympians-now> (Accessed: 28 March 2024). For 2024, see: Sky Sports News (2024) *Olympics 2024: Team GB gold medal winners in Paris plus full medal table*. Available at: <https://www.skysports.com/olympics/news/15234/13193829/olympics-2024-team-gb-gold-medal-winners-in-paris-plus-full-medal-table> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

¹⁵⁵ For a list of HMC schools, please see: HMC. *Schools Directory*. Available at: <https://www.hmc.org.uk/schools/schools-directory/> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

¹⁵⁶ Please note, if an athlete won more than one gold medal in the same or multiple years, they were only counted once for our calculations.

In the 2024 Paris Olympics, 33 per cent of Team GB was independently educated.¹⁵⁷

Looking at more recent evidence with less of a time lag, a 2015 report from the Sutton Trust and upReach charities found that the average salary difference between independently- and state-educated graduates was £1,300 per year six months after graduation and £4,450 per year three years after graduation. They also found that just half of this difference can be explained by factors such as prior academic achievement and the type of university attended.¹⁵⁸

This mirrors other research from the Sutton Trust on the later outcomes of students from the Assisted Places Scheme, which concluded that these students went on to better careers and higher outcomes not only due to better results and degrees, but also due to good soft skills.¹⁵⁹

University progression and performance

Looking at current independent schooling outcomes, in 2023 76 per cent of independent school Year 13 leavers went straight into higher education, with 14 per cent having deferred entry into higher education.

Over half (51 per cent) of the 90 per cent continuing to higher education are attending 'Top 25' universities (determined by *The Times and Sunday Times* Good University Guide 2023), although just four per cent are attending Oxbridge.¹⁶⁰

The total of 90 per cent progressing to university can be compared with the most recent estimate of 47.1 per cent of all pupils reaching higher education by the age of 20 across England, to show a large gap in the immediate post-school prospects between the independent and state sectors. This gap grows when isolating the top 20 universities on *The Times* rankings.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) research from 2015 found that 82 per cent of independent school pupils got first class or upper second class degrees at university, compared to 73 per cent of state school students. They were also more likely to have achieved a degree at all and were more likely to continue onto employment or further study.

However, when controlling for GCSE and A-Level performance, the evidence has generally suggested that independently educated students perform less well in their final year at university.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Sky News (2024) *Paris 2024 Olympics: One in three of Team GB went to private secondary school, new analysis suggests*. Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/one-in-three-of-team-gb-went-to-private-secondary-school-new-analysis-suggests-13184524> (Accessed: 13 August 2024)

¹⁵⁸ Sutton Trust (2015) *Private Pay Progression*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Private-Pay-Progression-1.pdf> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

¹⁵⁹ Power, S. et al (2013) *Lasting benefits: The Long-term Legacy of the Assisted Places Scheme for Assisted Place Holders*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/LastingBenefits2013.pdf> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

¹⁶⁰ Independent Schools Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 September 2024).

¹⁶¹ Thiele, T. et al. (2014) *Predicting students' academic performance based on school and socio-demographic characteristics*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03075079.2014.974528> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

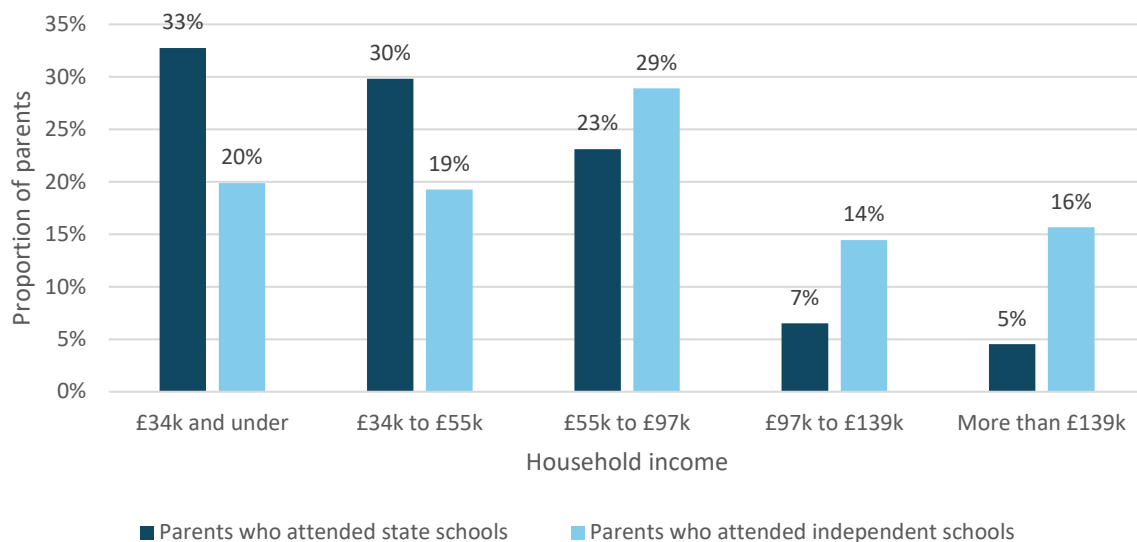
The general view of the academic literature seems to be that because independent schools generally offer better education, an independently educated student with the same underlying ability as a state educated student would be expected to enter university with noticeably better performance at 16 and 18. They do also perform better at the end of their degree, but the gap narrows slightly over the course of the degree.¹⁶²

This has been one cause of many universities tending to prefer state educated students over independently educated students at the same grade level at 18. This has led to concern within the independent sector that independently educated students, achieving top grades in all or most subjects, cannot demonstrate their ability against state educated children and have a disadvantage when applying for the highest tariff courses, such as medicine courses and places at Oxford and Cambridge. This shows how variation in school quality can contaminate the signalling effect of GCSE and A-Level results.

Evidence from Civitas/Deltapoll polling

Our polling results provided insight into the outcomes of independently educated individuals against that of state educated individuals. We saw that 30 per cent of the parents in our sample that had attended independent schools themselves had household incomes exceeding £97,000 per year, compared to just 12 per cent of those in our sample who had attended state schools. This provides a further statistical basis for the investment product understanding of independent schooling from Chapter 2.2.

Figure 5.2: Household income of parents by type of school attended



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 1,673 English parents of school age children, 19-31 January 2024.

¹⁶² Ibid.

5.2 The relationship between the state and independent sectors

The independent schools sector places a significant emphasis on its partnership work, considering it to be a cornerstone of their public benefit. This section looks to examine the current evidence on partnership activity, as a foundation for understanding how partnership will fit in a wider vision of the sector.

‘I think independent schools have moved on from, “We’re great at partnerships because the local primary school use our swimming pool once a week,” to actually having mutual governing body memberships talking about different pedagogical experiments or methods and it genuinely being a partnership of mutual benefit, not the sort of crumbs off the table approach’ – Parliamentarian.

Measurement of partnership activity

The independent and state school sectors engage in a significant amount of partnership work. The six per cent of schools in England that are in the ISC do the bulk of this work.¹⁶³

Cross-sector partnership can often be a difficult concept to understand as the term is not clearly defined and captures such a wide range of cross-sector collaborative activities, of which many are activities that most of the general public might not have had in their school experience.

There is also a significant natural limitation to school partnership activities as there are over nine state schools for every independent school in England, and there are 17 state schools for every ISC school in England.¹⁶⁴ More acutely, the independent sector is much more concentrated in London and the South East, as discussed in Chapter 1, making partnership work outside of these areas much more difficult.

The ISC annual *Celebrating Partnerships*¹⁶⁵ publication details some of the independent-state partnership work that goes on, as does the *ISC Annual Census*¹⁶⁶ and the Schools Together¹⁶⁷ website.

There is no formal definition of independent-state partnerships, nor any formal way that incidence and impact are measured in aggregate. Across the independent sector, there are 22 ‘formal partnerships’ where groups of schools have a joint understanding of the nature

¹⁶³ Department for Education (2023) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 3 October 2023). Independent Schools Council (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Fryer, T. (2023) *Benefiting the public? A study of private-state school partnerships*. Available at: https://a87907.n3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/BenefitingthePublic_PepfReport_August23.pdf (Accessed: 11 March 2024).

¹⁶⁶ Independent Schools Council (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

¹⁶⁷ Schools Together. Available at: <https://www.schoolstogether.org/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

and purpose of the partnership work, in which the responsibilities and roles of each school are understood.¹⁶⁸ Even within these, however, there is little formal impact assessment.

The ISC reported in 2024 that over the course of 2023 there were 1,068 (76 per cent) independent schools involved, between them, in a total of 9,248 partnerships.¹⁶⁹ Partnerships are defined in the report at an activity level, not a partner level (number of activities, not schools involved), such that some schools have dozens of partnerships by this accounting. There is no aggregated data on how extensive each of these partnerships is, although Schools Together does have a catalogue of over 4,500 case studies.¹⁷⁰ These case studies are, however, not consistent in terms of measurement or description.

The number of state schools involved in independent-state partnerships is also not measured at an aggregate level, although a list of state schools involved is given for each independent-state partnership.

The following focuses exclusively on ISC schools.

Secondment of staff and joint events

The most common type of independent-state partnership was playing sporting fixtures with or against state schools, which 790 (57 per cent) independent schools had pursued. Hosting joint sporting events was also common, which 526 (38 per cent) independent schools had done.

How many fixtures played against state schools by independent schools that participated in this type of partnership was not collected at an aggregate level, nor was the number of state schools at the sporting events nor the frequency of those events.

There are further examples given by the ISC similar to this in sport, music, academics and drama. In 2024, in the ISC, in terms of secondment:

- 89 independent schools seconded teaching staff in the arts to state schools.
- 95 independent schools seconded coaching staff in sport to state schools.
- 150 independent schools seconded teaching staff in academics to state schools.

And in terms of joint events:

- 526 schools hosted joint sporting events, as mentioned.
- 235 schools hosted joint musical events.
- 681 schools hosted joint educational events including lessons and workshops.
- 135 schools hosted joint drama events.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Schools Together. Available at: <https://www.schoolstogether.org/> (Accessed: 8 August 2024).

¹⁶⁹ Independent Schools Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3j/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 8 August 2024).

¹⁷⁰ Schools Together. Available at: <https://www.schoolstogether.org/> (Accessed: 8 August 2024).

¹⁷¹ ISC (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 19 February 2024).

Sharing facilities

Another common form of partnership was the sharing of various school facilities, Table 5.1 shows the incidence of this. The most recent data for this is 2023 as it was not reported in the 2024 ISC annual census.

It is only known that these facilities have been shared with state schools; there is no measurement of the extent of facilities sharing, only the number of participating ISC schools. This is not at all to suggest that the facility sharing is not extensive, but to note that it is not thoroughly reported.

Table 5.1: ISC schools' facilities and incidence of facilities sharing, 2023 ISC Annual Census

Facility	Independent schools with facility	Independent schools sharing facility	Proportion that share facility
Sports field(s)	914	261	29%
Swimming pool	577	260	45%
Astroturf	759	209	28%
Sports centre	555	158	28%
Other sports facilities	Not reported	170	n/a
Concert hall/theatre	782	191	24%
Dance studio(s)	503	69	14%

Source: Independent Schools Council (2023) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 19 December 2024).

Volunteering and shared professional development

The second most common type of independent-state school partnership is independent school teachers volunteering as governors at state schools, something that 627 (45 per cent) ISC schools demonstrated. This, alongside the 367 schools that have teachers participate in teacher training events with local state school teachers, represents a significant incidence of independent school teachers engaging with local state schools through volunteering and shared professional development.

Careers and higher education guidance

Other common types of independent-state partnership include initiatives such as joint higher education application guidance, joint careers fairs, breakfast clubs and summer camps.

Case studies

Due to the difficulty in analysing the nature of partnership work across the independent schools sector, it is helpful to look at a few case studies of good practice in partnership work.

King Edward VI Foundation, Birmingham

The King Edward VI Foundation in Birmingham is a somewhat unique partnership model of genuine integrated management of the schools. There are 14 schools in the foundation, of

which 12 are state schools, which together form the King Edward VI Academy Trust. This Academy trust is made up of six grammar and six comprehensive schools. The other two schools together form Schools of King Edward VI in Birmingham, which are both independent – one all-boys school and one all-girls school.¹⁷²

The umbrella organisation, the King Edward VI Foundation, sits above these two legal entities (King Edward VI Academy Trust and Schools of King Edward VI in Birmingham) and the separate boards have autonomy whilst also having common leadership and strategy and a significant element of common resource as well.¹⁷³

In particular, the endowment of King Edward’s School (the all-boys independent school) helps subsidise the central services of the Academies Trust. This endowment also helps fund the bursary programme of King Edward’s School and King Edward VI High School for Girls, which have some of the most extensive bursary provision in the country. This funding is done sustainably, such that the endowment size is stable over the long-term whilst funding these operations.¹⁷⁴

The impact of this integrated model is considerable. Perhaps most significantly, in March 2024, King Edward VI Balaam Wood Academy, one of the six comprehensive schools in the group, was rated ‘Good’ by Ofsted, the first time in 18 years that a school in their part of Birmingham has been awarded at least a ‘Good’ rating by Ofsted.¹⁷⁵

The Foundation’s standard is also underpinned by a group wide accessibility. As well as the extensive bursary provision in the independent schools, with over 100 boys in King Edward’s School on 90 per cent plus bursaries, the six grammar schools have a 25 per cent quota for the proportion of pupils on pupil premium.¹⁷⁶

This is compared with approximately a quarter of grammar schools nationally having fewer than five per cent of pupil premium eligible pupils and the national average for grammar schools being estimated at below 10 per cent in one study using Freedom of Information (FOI) data.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, five of the six grammar schools are rated ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted and the other is rated ‘Good’.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² King Edward VI Foundation. Available at: <https://kingedwardvifoundation.co.uk/> (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Comprehensive Future. *The latest statistics showing how many pupil premium pupils access grammar schools*. Available at: <https://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/the-latest-statistics-on-pupil-premium-pupils-in-grammar-schools/#:~:text=The%20proportion%20of%20disadvantaged%20pupils,disadvantaged%20pupils%20in%20secondary%20schools>. (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

¹⁷⁸ King Edward VI Foundation. Available at: <https://kingedwardvifoundation.co.uk/> (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

The performance of the King Edward VI Academy Trust is very strong. The Trust has a progress 8 score of 0.49,¹⁷⁹ which places it in the top 10 per cent of Academy Trusts.¹⁸⁰ This is particularly striking as Birmingham is an area where schools perform on average slightly worse than the national average.¹⁸¹

The Foundation facilitates extensive partnering work due to its shared strategy and leadership, with a foundation-wide cricket and rugby team and debating competition, to name a few examples.

There are some examples of this sort of integrated partnership work growing. Most recently, in December 2024, the Warwick Schools Foundation received approval from the DfE for Academy status for four schools to become the founding members of the Warwick Schools Foundation Multi Academy Trust. This is set to become a new integrated body featuring state and independent schools.¹⁸²

Lumina Tutoring

Launched at Harrow School during the first national lockdown in 2020 and since expanded, Lumina Tutoring 'is a transformative non-profit collaboration';¹⁸³ an online programme with the mission of providing 'personalised online tutoring and mentorship to empower vulnerable young people, fostering academic success, building self-esteem, and creating a supportive network.' In particular, they help children who are either in or on the edge of local authority care, as they say there is an 'urgent need' to improve the educational attainment of looked after children.¹⁸⁴

They provide no-cost, remote tutoring on a wide range of subjects by bringing together a community of teachers (known as Lumina Mentors) who volunteer their time once a week (during term time only) to provide a one-on-one, 45-minute session. To ensure a lasting impact, each volunteer works with the same student through the academic cycle.¹⁸⁵

Lumina have partnered with over 19 schools and nine local authorities – helping more than 100 looked after children across all key stages.¹⁸⁶ In the past year alone, Lumina Tutoring has grown 200 per cent, providing over 2,000 hours of tutorial sessions with the help of over 60 Lumina Mentors.¹⁸⁷ Being online, Lumina has particular potential to address current geographical challenges facing the independent schools sector.

¹⁷⁹ Progress 8 is a secondary attainment measure that looks to evaluate how a pupil progress across 8 qualifications from the end of primary school to GCSEs.

¹⁸⁰ Department for Education. *Compare schools and college performance in England: King Edward VI Academy Trust Birmingham*. Available at: <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/multi-Academy-trust/16826/king-edward-vi-Academy-trust-birmingham?tab=secondary> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Warwick Schools Foundation (2024) *WSF MAT: December 2024 Update*. Available at: <https://www.warwickschoolsfoundation.co.uk/wsf-mat> (Accessed: 6 January 2025).

¹⁸³ Lumina Tutoring (2024) Available at: <https://lumina.org.uk/> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁸⁴ Lumina Tutoring (2024) *About Us*. Available at: <https://lumina.org.uk/About-Us> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Lumina Tutoring (2024) Available at: <https://lumina.org.uk/> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁸⁷ Lumina Tutoring (2024) *About Us*. Available at: <https://lumina.org.uk/About-Us> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

EtonX

EtonX was founded by Eton College in 2015 and is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the college. Its 'mission is to create high-quality courses that allow students to develop the skills they need for their future success.' Three principles underpin all the work done: 'High-quality content', 'Innovative technology', and 'Proven pedagogy'.¹⁸⁸

Through its work, EtonX brings 'together expertise in evidence-led teaching practices, experience in engaging and inspiring learners, and development of innovative online course delivery models.' Each course has its own Eton College Course Director who is an expert in that particular field. Courses include activities undertaken during lessons and tutorials at Eton, as well as in extra-curricular activities which reflect Eton's teaching ethos.¹⁸⁹ The course categories are: 'Elevate your Learning', 'Be a Leader', 'Get into University', and 'Start a Career'¹⁹⁰ – with courses including Computer Science GCSE, Critical Thinking, and Public Speaking.¹⁹¹

'In 2020, EtonX courses became a key part of Eton College's Social Vision which aims to address education inequality in the UK.' The courses, through the College's Partnership programme, were made freely available to UK state schools and numerous charitable organisations which promote social mobility and aim to improve access to higher education. So far, this has enabled over 400,000 children to access the courses.¹⁹²

Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF)

Some of the best known engagement of the independent sector with state provided education has been done by the Royal National SpringBoard Foundation, who take disadvantaged children and those close to or in the social care system and grant them 110 per cent bursaries (full fee assistance plus budget for additional costs).

In 2020, RNCSF were awarded funding from the DfE to deliver the Broadening Educational Pathways programme for looked-after and vulnerable children (on the edge of care).¹⁹³ In this scheme, 110 per cent RNCSF bursaries for disadvantaged children to attend independent schools, in particular boarding schools, are part funded by local authorities to help cover residential costs and to increase the capacity of the RNCSF programme. Independent schools provide at least the first £22,000 in fee remission of the £35,000 to £45,000 boarding fees and then the rest of the place is part funded by the local authority and by RNCSF.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁸ EtonX (2024) *About EtonX*. Available at: <https://etonx.com/about-us/> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Eton X (2024) Available at: <https://etonx.com/> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁹¹ EtonX (2024) *Online courses*. Available at: <https://etonx.com/courses/> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁹² EtonX (2024) *About EtonX*. Available at: <https://etonx.com/about-us/> (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

¹⁹³ Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*. Available at: https://www.rovalsexpringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024)

¹⁹⁴ Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation and the Department for Education. "*Broadening Educational Pathways*" for looked-after and vulnerable children. Available at: https://idpe.org.uk/idpe/uploads/News%20pages/FAQs%20Independent%20school%20places%20for%20LAC_CIN_HMC%20schools.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024)

In the first three years of the scheme, 150 looked-after children and vulnerable children secured a new state or boarding or independent schools place through the scheme, worth over £20 million; 30 local authorities actively engaged with the programme, and over 200 schools signed up to a 'pledge of priority access' for care-experienced children to their fee assistance reward schemes.

The children from the scheme were four times more likely to achieve five high GCSEs including English and maths than they would have been otherwise and 94 per cent of them secured two or more A-Levels compared to 82 per cent of disadvantaged pupils nationwide.¹⁹⁵

Perhaps most notably, as well as being an effective scheme, RNCSF is cost-efficient for government. It was estimated that, in the first three years, the scheme saved HM Treasury £2.75 million in social care costs and £3.2 million in state school places that were not taken.¹⁹⁶

There has also been significant research on the value-add of attending these schools for the children that have gone through the programme (known as 'SpringBoarders').

A Pro Bono Economics study in 2022 examined the impact of these "110%" bursaries' at boarding school on the A-level outcomes of disadvantaged students. They found that 'SpringBoarders' made an estimated 12 months of additional progress compared to similar pupils.¹⁹⁷

The RNCSF impact report underlines this picture. Whilst 30 per cent of disadvantaged pupils nationally secure at least a grade 5 in English and maths GCSEs, 77 per cent of disadvantaged SpringBoarders do; and while five per cent of vulnerable pupils nationally secure at least a grade 5 in English and maths GCSEs, 61 per cent of vulnerable SpringBoarders do.¹⁹⁸

This shows the potential impact an independent education can have on disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

Incidence of independent-state partnership activity

In general, it is clear that while a large amount of partnership activity goes on, this work is not as well reported or coordinated as it could be, resulting in some of the benefits of the

¹⁹⁵ Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*. Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

¹⁹⁶ Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*. Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024)

¹⁹⁷ Kerr, M. (2022) *Exploring the impact of boarding school bursary places for children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds*. Available at: <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b3939c3e-eb50-441b-8eee-ec4f10fb4eb2> (Accessed: 12 March 2024).

¹⁹⁸ Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Transforming life chances through education: Impact report*. Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_3dd5031883934481a9d5712d544abef6.pdf (Accessed: 12 March 2024).

work not being realised. This is also sometimes true of discussion of the *purpose* of partnership work, and why it is an activity that schools should be pursuing.

Lack of formal measurement and reporting

‘The criticism of partnership working is that some of it is tokenistic, or a lot of it. The real critics would say it’s virtually all tokenistic. I don’t think that’s true, and I think a lot of what happens is very good and should happen anyway, regardless of whether it ticks a box. But some of it is tokenistic, if I’m honest.’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

As there is no formal measurement of independent-state partnership activity, it is difficult to accurately gauge the incidence of it at a national level. It is particularly difficult to estimate the proportion of state schools engaged in partnership activities and the impact that these activities have on those state schools.

This is true of a substantial amount of activity at schools, but most activity at schools does not have the level of political interest that partnerships do.

In this sense, it is not that independent schools would intuitively be expected to report partnership in detail as a point of principle, it is more that many of the opportunities that partnership presents depend on reporting. This presents an opportunity and a challenge for the sector to ‘market’ their partnership work in a way that makes it understandable and that undermines criticisms of ‘tokenism’. Reporting also allows improving of partnership standards through transparency and sharing of best practice.

Relative sizes of independent and state sectors

Another challenge with partnership work is that it is not best understood as a ‘silver bullet’. This is because there are simply not enough independent schools with a capacity to do significant partnership for it to be able to have a particularly large-scale impact on the state school sector. This is further exacerbated by the geographic unevenness of the independent sector.

‘The number of independent schools is very small compared to the number of state schools. Let’s say there are [2,400] independent schools and, of those, 1,300 are jolly small. There are 22,000 state schools. So, if you asked state school headteachers what they think of independent-state school partnerships, they will say, “We don’t have any,” in many cases. There will only be a few who would say that they’re absolutely marvellous and the attitude and the generosity of the independent schools in our area are fantastic.’ – Interviewee from within the sector.

Research conducted in 2023 by the Private Education Policy Forum (PEPF) on a sample of 277 state schools found that 13 per cent had been engaged in an independent-state

partnership and that 69 per cent of the partnership activities were the hosting of a pupil event, either in terms of jointly run events or invitations to state schools to attend events.¹⁹⁹

Using this result, they estimated that this would correspond to 6,159 partnership activities across the country in the period studied, slightly lower than the ISC figure for that year over a slightly longer period of time, but, considering the small sample in the PEPF analysis, results that could be seen as broadly in keeping with one another.²⁰⁰

Acknowledging the significant limitations on understanding the nature of partnership activities and their individual impact, this limited research does allow some estimation of the overall incidence of independent-state partnership across schooling in England.

PEPF's research estimated an incidence of partnership activity that was 28 per cent lower than that of the ISC. This implies an ISC estimate of a little under 17 per cent of state schools involved in independent-state partnerships. Extrapolating this, we can estimate that if all 1,395 schools in the ISC across the UK were engaged in independent-state partnerships, instead of the 1,043 that there were in 2023,²⁰¹ at the same average incidence per school, then 22 per cent of state schools would be involved in state-independent partnerships.

These estimates indicate the limitations of the incidence of independent-state school partnerships. For the 1,339 ISC schools in England to engage in partnership work to an extent that it had a tangible impact on most of the over 22,000 state schools in England, the degree to which each independent school would have to engage in partnership work is extraordinary.

In addition to this, it is important to note – and many consultees did note – that extensive partnership work is not the best choice for a number of independent schools. For one simple example, the strategic sharing of facilities is not possible for an independent school with very basic facilities or in a remote location. This means that the realistic cap of partnership work from the sector is lower than that articulated above.

This presents an important point of realism in the feasibility of partnership activity. It does not make it any less valuable, but it means it cannot be the start and end of an educational vision for the sector.

Lack of state school participation

Another major challenge that partnership work currently faces is lack of participation from the state sector. Many consultees reported a scepticism around partnership work from those in the state schools sector.

¹⁹⁹ Fryer, T. (2023) *Benefiting the public? A study of private-state school partnerships*. Available at: https://a87907.n3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/BenefitingthePublic_PepfReport_August23.pdf (Accessed: 11 March 2024).

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Independent Schools Council (2023) *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 3 March 2024).

'I think, moving forward, [we need to nurture] a warmer response from state school heads, because, at the moment, there is a perception around the relationship between independent and state school partnerships.' – Expert witness.

In the view of most of the Commission's consultees, there is currently a common view across state school leadership that most partnerships are 'reactionary', 'condescending' or 'tokenistic'. A number of reasons for this, in no way limited to the nature of existing partnerships, were posited for this.

It seems clear that a significant challenge for the medium-term for partnership activity is to nurture more state school involvement, and it appears as though the most significant barrier to this – and an important initial step in resolving this – is the lack of understanding and reporting of existing partnerships. There is also potential for greater emphasis to be made on mutual learning.

5.3 Summary

- There is strong evidence that independent schooling has a positive impact on schooling outcomes, even when controlling for socioeconomic and other characteristics. The size of this impact is contested but likely reasonable.
- After school, independently educated young people perform on average better at university (although likely less so than at school) and earn more in their early careers. Many top professions such as judges, senior politicians and journalists, and elite sportspeople are disproportionately populated with those who were educated at independent school – mostly in the mid-late 20th Century, some time ago. The evidence tends to suggest that the advantage of independent schooling is sustained over the long term, arguably even increasing.
- There is a large appetite for partnership work and clearly a significant amount of partnership work does go on in the independent sector, as can be seen through some great case studies. However, it should not be seen as a silver bullet, with partnership facing significant obstacles in terms of the relative sizes of the state and independent sector and the unevenness of the geographic spread of independent schools.
- There are some major opportunities for developing partnership work, in particular its reporting and its perception within state schools – two issues highly related to one another.

Chapter 6. Perception of independent schools

We finish Part 2, understanding where independent schools sit in the wider education system, by evaluating the perception and reputation of the independent schools sector.

*In the consultation for the Commission, one of the most common themes discussed was the reputation of the independent school sector. Although many consultees argued that the sector has a stronger reputation nationally than is often assumed, they all agreed that attaining and sustaining a positive public view of the sector is a major challenge for the medium-to-long term. This sentiment was also expressed strongly by our respondents in the school leaders survey. The four most common answers to the question ‘what needs to change outside of the independent schools sector?’ were **political support, public perception, understanding and recognition**. Many answers featured multiple use of these phrases.*

The first part of this chapter develops the public strand of these themes, and looks at the Commission’s polling results to understand the public perception of the independent sector. We identify four pillars to the public perception; four positions held somewhat in tension with one another. The first is an overwhelming public support for the right of the independent schools sector to exist and that it is right for parents to spend their money independently educating their children. The second is that the public consistently view the sector as high quality, and offering a good education. The third is that the independent schools sector is seen as exclusive, elitist and snobby. The fourth, tying the former three together, is that the public would favour a more accessible independent schools sector.

The second part of this chapter categorises public (in this case, parents’) perspectives into groups, referred to as ‘attitudinal clusters’. This allows us to identify how the public can be understood as consisting of cohorts with similar perspectives, alongside the aggregate spread of opinion on specific questions.

The third part of the chapter evaluates how the political view of the independent schools sector has evolved since the publication of ‘The future of socialism’ by Labour politician Anthony Crosland in 1956. This is done in four parts: 1956-1979 – a surge of pressure, 1979-1997 – relative comfort, 2006-2013 – return to attention, and 2014-Present – mounting challenge.

Chapter summary

The public view: A snapshot

- **A right to exist and a right investment:** When asked ‘do you think it is right or wrong for parents to use their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools?’, 72 per cent of the public thought that it is right, and just 10 per cent thought it is wrong.
- **A high-quality sector:** Among a number of other observations, 50 per cent of the public agreed with the assertion that independent schools have a higher standard of teaching than state schools, compared with 16 per cent that disagreed.
- **Exclusive:** The word most commonly associated with independent schools is ‘exclusive’ (46 per cent). The most common positive word associated was ‘aspirational’ with 15 per cent.
- **Benefit worth spreading:** When looking at different policy perspectives, including taxation, abolition, charitable status removal and an extension of bursaries and scholarships, by far the proposal most likely to make the public view the sector more favourably was extending bursary and scholarship provision, with 48 per cent of the public saying it would make them view the sector more favourably.

Categorising perspectives: attitudinal clusters

- The polling of parents found five distinct clusters of perspectives on the sector that have been called **die-hard defenders**, **amenable affirmers**, **ambivalent moderates**, **political critics** and **practical critics**.

The political view: A short history

- The political view of the independent sector since 1956 can be summarised into four eras: a surge of pressure, relative comfort, a return to attention and mounting challenge.
- **Surge of pressure (1956-1978):** Following the 1956 release of *The Future of Socialism* by Anthony Crosland, independent schooling became a target of the Labour Party, who considered banning or taxing independent schools on a number of occasions, although always considered it ultimately too extreme.
- **Relative comfort (1979-1997):** This era of pressure ended abruptly with the Thatcher government of 1979. What followed was 18 years of relative fondness from government, encapsulated by the Assisted Places Scheme.
- **Return to attention (2006-2013):** Following a period of quiet on the sector (1997-2006), there was a sharp return to attention initiated by the Charities Act 2006, which culminated in a legal case between the ISC and the Charity Commission.
- **Mounting challenge (2014-Present):** From 2013, independent schools have faced mounting pressure from both major parties, especially from Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, and ultimately realised in a unique tax policy imposed on the sector by the 2024 Labour government.

6.1 The public view: A snapshot

The public view of the independent sector can be summarised into four observations. First, a right to exist and right to invest; second, a high-quality sector; third, an exclusive and elitist sector; and fourth, tying the former three together, a benefit worth spreading.

A right to exist and right to invest

The first, clearest and arguably most important component of the public view is that the independent sector has a right to exist and should not be abolished, and that parents are right to use the sector.

‘In principle, do you think it is right or wrong for private schools, which provide paid-for education, to exist in England today?’²⁰²

Sixty-seven per cent of parents surveyed said that it is right for independent schools to exist, compared with 20 per cent that said that it is wrong. Although a number here answered that it is wrong, the overwhelmingly majority view was that it is right for independent schools to exist.

This was even clearer when asking about the usage of independent schools.

‘In principle, do you think it is right or wrong for parents to use their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools?’

Seventy-two per cent of the public said that it is right, just 10 per cent thought that it is wrong. This is a clear result and was maintained however the sample was sliced. The least agreement was among those who voted Labour in 2019 and even this group showed overwhelming support, with 63 per cent saying that it is right and 16 per cent thinking that it is wrong.

This overwhelming view was maintained, albeit slightly more weakly, when asking about abolition – a popular political contestation.

‘To what extent do you agree or disagree: ‘Private schools in England should be abolished’

Just 15 per cent of the public agreed that private schools should be abolished, compared with 52 per cent disagreeing.

Gen Zs, those aged 27 and under (in January 2024), were slightly warmer, although still overwhelmingly in opposition to abolition, with 23 per cent agreeing with it and 40 per cent opposing it.

Among parents, those who lived in urban areas (28 per cent) and who said that they could afford independent schools (30 per cent) were more likely to support abolition, but there was still consistent and clear opposition.

²⁰² This question was only asked to parents.

These results provide strong evidential weight to the ‘rights’ justification in Chapter 2.1.

A high-quality sector

The second observation from the polling exercise, shown across a large range of answers, was that independent schools are viewed as high quality. Figure 6.1 provides a sketch of this, looking at the aggregate perspectives across 14 statements that respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with.

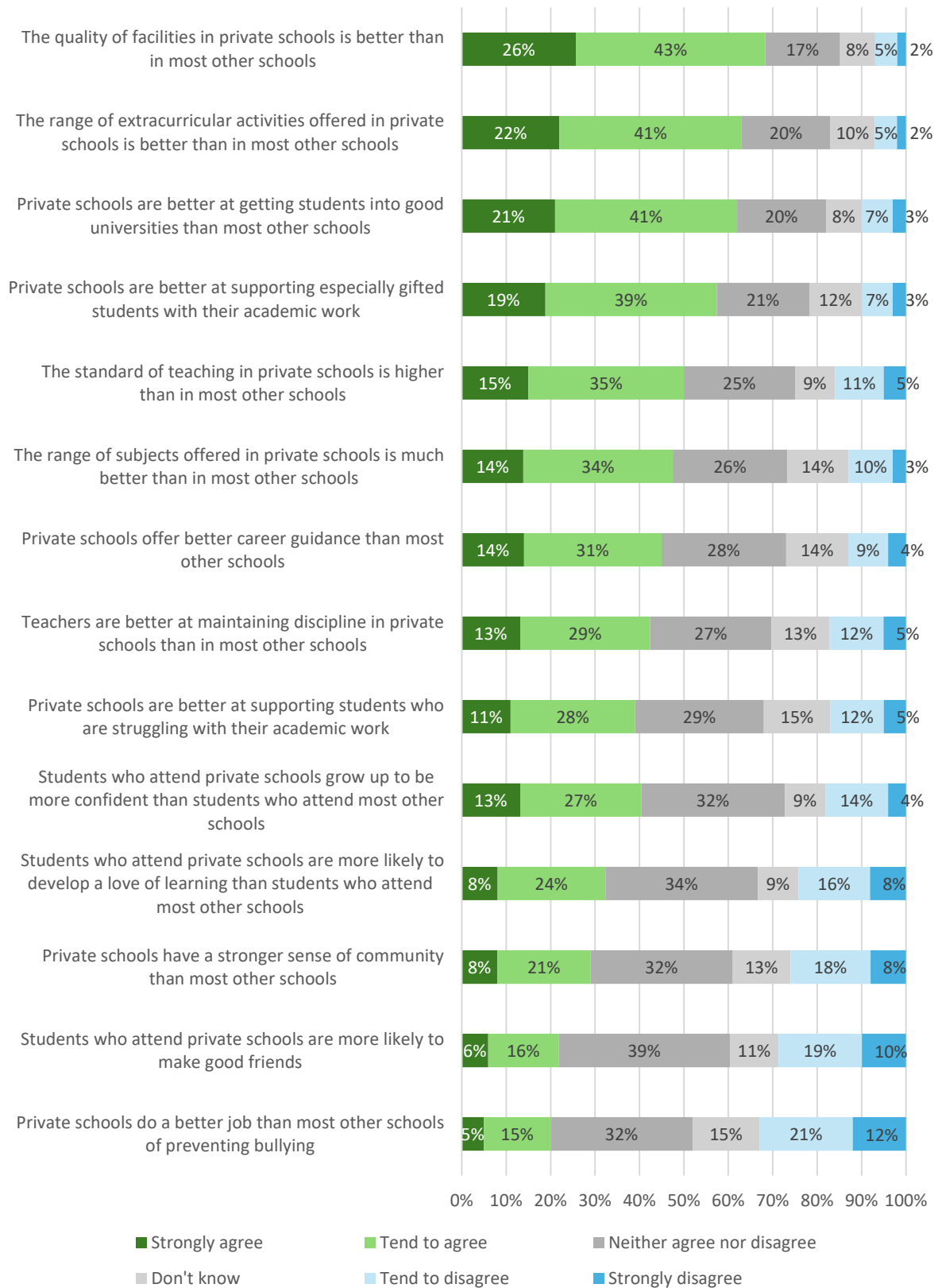
Most overwhelming was the public agreement that independent schools have better facilities (69 per cent agreed whilst just seven per cent disagreed), a better range of extracurricular activities (63 per cent agreed whilst just seven per cent disagreed), better university application help (62 per cent agreed whilst just 10 per cent disagreed) and better support to especially gifted students (58 per cent agreed whilst just 10 per cent disagreed).

Respondents were also more likely to agree than disagree that independent schools have a higher standard of teaching, a better range of subjects offered, better career guidance, better discipline, better support for struggling students and a stronger sense of community. Also, they suggested that those who go to independent schools are perceived as leaving more confident and being more likely to develop a love of learning.

Correspondingly, overall, there was strong agreement among parents that private schools give students an advantage because they are generally better schools (65 per cent agreed).

These first two observations, taken together, provide strong evidential weight to the ‘social capital’ justification in Chapter 2.1.

Figure 6.1: Poll of public: For each of the following statements, please say whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree.



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

An exclusive sector

Thirdly, the public view the independent sector as exclusive. In fact, this is possibly a generous description: the public are most likely to view the sector as exclusive, elitist, snobby and entitled.

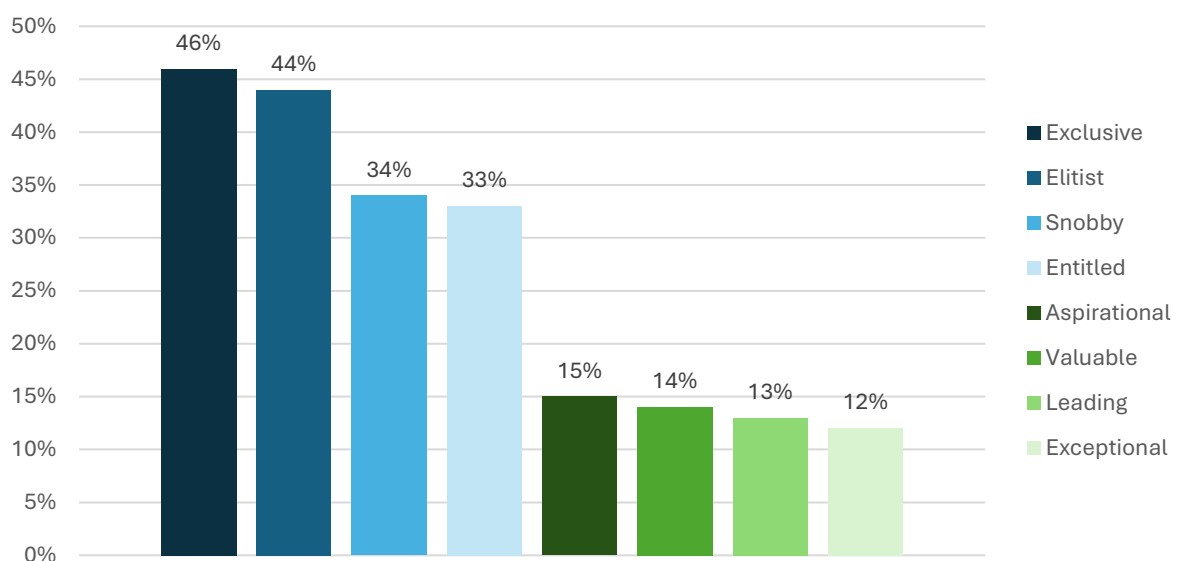
Figure 6.2 shows that, notwithstanding the clear public view that independent schools have a right to exist and are high-quality institutions, the public are around three times as likely to describe independent schools using negative words as positive.

The parents poll did, however, suggest that to immediately label 'exclusive' as a negative word would be reductive. An example of this is that those who thought that it is wrong for private schools to exist were less likely (34 per cent) to describe private schools as 'exclusive' than those who thought that it is right for private schools to exist (50 per cent). This could in part be due to respondents selecting a maximum of three.

Also, when categorising responses according to views on independent education, the attitudinal cluster (die-hard defenders, see Chapter 6.2) that was most likely to describe independent schools as 'valuable' (33 per cent) and 'exceptional' (33 per cent) was also the most likely to describe them as 'exclusive' (54 per cent).

It is worth noting that this result would not typically be expected alongside the first two observations: most people want the sector to exist, think it is high quality, and yet think it is exclusive and elitist. It is important that these observations are considered together.

Figure 6.2: Poll of public: 'In your opinion, which of the following words, if any, best describe private schools? Please select up to three.'



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024. Note: 'trendy' has been removed from this graph as it was extremely uncommon in responses.

Benefit worth spreading

Finally, the public view the independent schools sector as providing benefit to the education system that is worth spreading.

One somewhat surprising pair of results from the poll of parents was that of the impact of independent schools on schooling across England. Parents were more likely than not to agree with both the positive and negative view of the impact of the independent sector.

First, 47 per cent of parents agreed and just 22 per cent disagreed with the statement 'private schools improve the overall quality of schooling in England by driving higher standards across the education sector'.

Second, 36 per cent of parents agreed and a slightly smaller 31 per cent disagreed with the statement 'private schools lower the overall quality of schooling in England by drawing resources away from state schools'.

There was more support for the former than the latter, but clearly both sentiments resonate – this can be understood as a positive standards effect but a negative inequality effect.

This mirrors closely with the first three observations: the sector is viewed as right to exist, it is viewed as high quality – and, importantly, *better than state schools* – and it is viewed as exclusive/elitist. Both of the latter two tell a positive story of quality alongside a negative story of inequality.

We also see this in the view that the advantage independently educated children receive is unfair (49 per cent agreed and 23 per cent disagreed).

This makes sense: being a better school is commendable but it by definition generates an inequality in school quality. As this inequality grows, so develops – in the opinion of many – an imperative to share that quality.

This inference seemed to be justified when respondents were asked their views on policy perspectives. In both the nationally representative poll and the poll of parents, the policy perspective most likely to be viewed as favourably effecting respondent's opinion of the sector was 'private schools offer more bursaries/scholarships to children who otherwise could not afford to attend', with 48 per cent of the general public and 52 per cent of parents saying that this would make them view the sector more favourably.

In comparison, just 30 per cent of the public said that they would view the sector more favourably if VAT was charged on school fees, the policy that the government have opted for. This perhaps suggests that **the public appetite is more for the sector to behave and to be treated charitably than to behave and to be treated commercially**. This is of course contradictory to the baseline position of public opposition to charitable status.

6.2 Categorising perspectives: Attitudinal clusters

The parents responses collected were clustered into groups according to their views of independent schools. These groups show the positions different groups hold on independent schools and deepen the picture of the public snapshot.

The groups somewhat run from most to least positive about the sector, although there are some important nuances to this; the political and practical critics are opposed on different grounds, and the amenable affirmers are in a sense both the most complimentary and the most critical. Social grades indicate socioeconomic class; broadly speaking, social grade A and B indicates professional occupations, C skilled manual occupations, and D and E unskilled manual occupations and those who are unemployed.²⁰³

Die-hard defenders

This group are the most supportive of independent schools, both politically and in their opinion of them as schools. They are the most likely to be independent school parents themselves, and if they are not, they likely aspire to be (would if they could afford it) and consider independent schools to be aspirational. They are much less likely to recognise any negative impacts of independent schools on society.

Characteristics

Socioeconomically, this group was a little more likely to be from social grade A or B (45 per cent versus 41 per cent of all respondents) and was more likely to have a household income over £76,000 per year (26 per cent versus 18 per cent of all respondents).

Perspectives

There are three clear views of die-hard defenders, across the range of questions. They near-unanimously think it is right for independent schools to exist in England today (92 per cent); they overwhelmingly (over 80 per cent for each) agreed that the quality of schooling at independent schools is better than at most other schools, that the facilities are better, that the extra-curricular opportunities are better and that the career guidance offered is better; and they clearly view (66 per cent agree) independent schools as improving education across England as a whole.

Amenable affirmers

This group is supportive of independent schools (and contains a high proportion of independent school and would-be independent school parents), however in some cases they show political opposition. In general, their responses were clear examples of the public tension that exists over the sector's reputation.

This group presents a clear reputational challenge with respect to how the sector exists politically. This group, more likely to be urban, affluent, liberal (taking immigration views as a

²⁰³ Office for National Statistics (2023) *Approximated Social Grade, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/approximatedsocialgradeenglandandwales/census2021> (Accessed: 18 December 2024).

proxy)²⁰⁴ and more likely to have voted in 2019, is simultaneously very warm and cold to the sector. In spite of a very high valuing of the quality of the sector and a belief in the right of parents to purchase independent education, there is also a warmth towards equality arguments to tax or abolish the independent sector.

This group is one of the most interesting. Amenable affirmers are very complimentary of independent schools and yet are acutely concerned about the sector being unfair. This presents a reputational challenge for the independent sector to provide a vision for collaboration with the wider schools sector, as a major part of the sector's reputational 'base' also see them as unfair.

Characteristics

This group was younger: 31 per cent were aged 35 or under, compared with 24 per cent of all other respondents and only 29 per cent were 43 or older, compared with 37 per cent of all other respondents. They were also much more likely to live in London (24 per cent versus 15 per cent of all respondents) and more likely to live in an urban area (58 per cent versus 42 per cent of all respondents). Although fairly spread along party lines, this group was more liberal, with 57 per cent supporting an increase in immigration versus 30 per cent of all respondents. Socioeconomically, this group was more likely to be university educated (80 per cent versus 67 per cent of all respondents) and was more likely to have a household income over £76,000 per year (25 per cent versus 18 per cent of all respondents).

Perspectives

As with die-hard defenders, over 80 per cent of amenable affirmers agreed that the quality of schooling at independent schools is better than at most other schools, that the facilities are better, that the extra-curricular opportunities are better and that the career guidance offered is better. They were also overwhelmingly positive about the sector's right to exist (70 per cent versus 20 per cent) and about parents who use the sector.

However, 87 per cent of amenable affirmers agreed that independent schools lower the quality of schooling in England by drawing resources away from state schools. At the same time, 78 per cent agreed that independent schools improve the overall quality of schools across England by raising standards. This group most acutely represented the tension shown across the first three observations in Chapter 6.1.

Ambivalent moderates

As with almost all policy areas, there is a reasonably sizeable middle-ground; this group here has been referred to as the 'ambivalent moderates'. They rarely express a strong opinion either way and are consistently the most likely to say that they neither agree nor disagree with the statements posed. In general, whatever the general population's view on an issue, this group holds a more moderate version of the same view.

²⁰⁴ This is not to call this an airtight definition of one's political liberalness but to consider it a reasonably good indicator. Respondents were asked whether they think immigration should be higher, lower or stay the same.

This group is perhaps the most intuitively representative of 'typical' members of the public. Although showing little interest in ideological criticisms of the sector, this was the group that most associated independent schools with 'exclusive' and 'snobby'. Generally speaking, this suggests that ambivalent moderates are not especially fond of the independent sector, but are not strongly opposed to it, either.

Characteristics

This group was less likely to have voted in the 2019 General Election, and was less likely to support increasing or decreasing immigration (the group most likely to answer 'don't know' and the group most likely to answer 'stay the same'). This group was also more likely to have a household income below £34,000 per year (39 per cent versus 33 per cent of all respondents).

Perspectives

Most of this group thought that it was right for private schools to exist (59 per cent versus 20 per cent). Across the 14 statements on quality of independent schools (Figure 6.1), ambivalent moderates illustrated their ambivalence: 42 per cent of responses answered 'neither agree nor disagree', compared to 25 per cent of all responses; and just eight per cent of responses strongly agreed or strongly disagreed, compared to 26 per cent of all responses. Just 37 per cent of responses agreed, comfortably below the average, however just 16 per cent of responses disagreed, also below the average.

A political example of their ambivalence is that this group were the least likely to oppose VAT exemptions, but they were not the most likely to support them. Thirty-seven per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

Political critics

This group is politically opposed to independent schools (to the greatest degree of any group). They do not believe that independent schools ought to be afforded tax relief and they think that their impact on society is predominantly negative. Importantly, they also affirm the quality of independent schools.

These political critics represent a reputational opportunity in terms of the high valuation they give the quality of the sector. It seems clear that this group views the sector as excellent but profoundly unfair.

Returning to the key tension, quality but inequality, this group strongly concludes that the inequality is more important.

Critically, a very large 59 per cent of this group said that they would view the sector more favourably if independent schools offered more bursaries/scholarships to children who otherwise could not afford to attend. This suggests strongly that although they hold the sector as uncharitable, they would support it becoming more charitable, as well as also supporting it losing charitable status.

Characteristics

This group was slightly older: 42 per cent of them were Gen X (aged 43 to 59 in January 2024) or Baby Boomers (60 to 79 in January 2024) compared with 37 per cent of all respondents. Geographically, this group was less likely to live in London (11 per cent versus 15 per cent of all respondents) and less likely to be urban (33 per cent versus 42 per cent of all respondents).

Socioeconomically, although this group was not disproportionately likely to be low or high income, this group was slightly more likely to be of social grade C (47 per cent versus 41 per cent of all respondents) and was slightly less likely to be university educated (65 per cent versus 71 per cent of all respondents).

Perspectives

This group are the least likely to think it is right for independent schools to exist (54 per cent), and the most likely to oppose charitable status (80 per cent) or the recently removed VAT exemption (84 per cent). That said, they consistently view independent schools as good schools across the 14 statements, and oppose abolition (51 per cent).

This group were most convinced on policy questions. Importantly, this group were quite positive about the quality of independent schools: 47 per cent of their responses to the 14 statements (Figure 6.1) were in agreement, similar to the 52 per cent agreeing across all five groups and more than either ambivalent moderates or practical critics. Just 22 per cent of their responses disagreed with statements.

Practical critics

This group is disparaging of independent schools. They are politically opposed, but their opposition primarily manifests in their view of independent schools as schools. They do not accept that independent schools have any advantages over other schools, even though they also consider the existence of independent schools to be unfair.

They – alongside die-hard defenders – are one of the two groups for whom the prevailing tension – quality but inequality – was not seen. For die-hard defenders, this was a lack of concern over inequality; for practical critics, this was a lack of confidence in quality.

The nature of the reputational question for this (relatively small) group is very different to the other groups – their concern over the independent sector appears to be low-quality schooling, and not related to inequality.

Characteristics

This group was more likely to have been born outside the UK (25 per cent versus 17 per cent of all respondents). Socioeconomically, this group was less likely to be of social grade A or B (31 per cent versus 41 per cent of all respondents), was slightly less likely to be university educated (61 per cent versus 67 per cent of all respondents), and was more likely to have a household income below £34,000 per year (40 per cent versus 33 per cent of all respondents).

Perspectives

Although supporting their existence and the right of parents to use them, this group viewed independent schools in a very low light. Across the 14 statements (Figure 6.1), just 13 per cent of practical critic responses were in agreement. No other group had less than 37 per cent agreement and the average across the five groups was 52 per cent.

6.3 The political view: A short history

A surge of pressure: 1956-1978

In 1956, politician Anthony Crosland published his book *The Future of Socialism*, where he declared fee-paying schools to be the ‘most flagrant inequality of opportunity’.

This was the beginning of two decades of organised opposition to independent schools within the Labour Party.

The next Labour government was the 1964 Wilson Government, which promised to end both grammar schools and independent schools. Pledging to end the ‘segregation of children caused by 11-plus selection’²⁰⁵ and find ‘the best way of integrating the public schools into the state system of education’,²⁰⁶ Wilson appointed Anthony Crosland as Education Secretary in 1965.

Later in 1965, Circular 10/65 was issued – asking local education authorities (LEAs) to move to non-selective secondary education.²⁰⁷ The intention was to convert all schools (in particular, grammar schools) into comprehensive schools. This was the beginning of the end of the tripartite state sector,²⁰⁸ but was no such death for the independent schools sector.

To address independent schools (referred to as ‘Public Schools’, a subset of the sector), Crosland set up the Public Schools Commission²⁰⁹ – who issued two reports (the Newsom Report 1968, and the Donnison Report 1970). The Newsom Report made 52 recommendations, including state funding of up to 45,000 places at boarding schools (not dissimilar to the Assisted Places Scheme),²¹⁰ but it made very little impact when compared with how radical the sentiment was at that time.²¹¹ Grammar schools were all but abolished and independent schools were largely unscathed.

Many, including prominent socialist Labour Party politician Tony Benn, commented afterwards that abolishing independent schools was ultimately considered too extreme for the electorate.²¹²

In 1974, Harold Wilson again won Labour an election, and the Government continued their opposition to selective secondary schools, enacting the Direct Grant Grammar Schools (Cessation of Grant) Regulations 1975 to abolish direct grant grammar schools.

²⁰⁵ Labour Party (1964) *1964 Labour Party Election Manifesto*. Available at: <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1964/1964-labour-manifesto.shtml> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Bolton, P. (2012) *Education: Historical statistics*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04252/SN04252.pdf> (Accessed: 11 April 2024).

²⁰⁸ The state sector came to be known as ‘tripartite’ after the 1944 Education Act as there were three types of state secondary school: grammar, secondary modern and technical.

²⁰⁹ Kynaston, D. *A history of private schools and reform*. PEPF. Available at: <https://www.pepf.co.uk/history/>. (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

²¹⁰ Her Majesty’s Stationery Office (1968) *The Newsom Report (1968): The Public Schools Commission: First Report*. Available at: <https://education-uk.org/documents/psc1/newsom1968-1.html> (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

²¹¹ Kynaston, D. *A history of private schools and reform*. PEPF. Available at: <https://www.pepf.co.uk/history/>. (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

²¹² University of Cambridge (2018) *Briefing Paper: Independent Schools after 1945*. Available at: <https://sec.hist.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Briefing-paper-Independents.pdf> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

In fact, this particular move arguably benefitted independent schools as 119 of the 174 direct-grant grammar schools became independent²¹³ (between 1964 and 1979, the number of grammar schools fell from 1,298 to 261). Some parents also moved their children from grammar schools that had gone comprehensive to independent schools.²¹⁴

Although they remained free of the abolition many called for and most grammar schools received, this period was difficult for the independent schools sector, whose share of pupils fell from 8.1 per cent to 5.7 per cent between 1963 and 1978.

As Labour became more explicitly opposed to independent schools over these decades, the Conservative Party became slowly more supportive, stating in their 1979 manifesto that they would introduce an 'Assisted Places Scheme' so 'bright children' from poorer backgrounds could 'claim part or all of the fees at certain schools from a special government fund.'²¹⁵

Relative comfort: 1979-1997

The Conservatives won the election in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher, and the Assisted Places Scheme was introduced in 1980. The Government said the scheme would provide a 'ladder of opportunity' for academically-gifted children from poor homes, and over its 17 years of existence, it enabled over 75,000 pupils to receive means-tested assistance from public funds to attend the top independent schools in England and Wales.²¹⁶ Under the Thatcher government, the share of pupils at independent schools rose from 5.9 to 7.4 per cent.

This started a period of relative comfort for the independent sector – the Thatcher Governments of 1979-1990 and the Major Governments of 1990-1997 were consistently favourable to the sector and independent schools' political standing remained strong for the majority of two decades.

Also during Thatcher's leadership was the 1988 Education Reform Act. Because of the Act, a national curriculum was introduced, with core subjects (English, science, mathematics, and religious education) to be taught to all pupils. The introduction of a National Curriculum added an additional layer of distinctiveness between state and independent schools, and independent schools had no requirement to follow it.

In the build up to the 1997 General Election, the Conservatives pledged to expand the Assisted Places Scheme 'to cover all ages of compulsory education' whilst the Labour Party

²¹³ University of Cambridge (2018) *Briefing Paper: Independent Schools after 1945*. Available at: <https://sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Briefing-paper-Independents.pdf> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

²¹⁴ House of Commons (2013) *Grammar school statistics*. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/22723/1/SN01398.pdf> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

²¹⁵ Conservative Party (1979) *Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979*. Thatcher Archive. Available at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858> (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

²¹⁶ Power, S. et al (2013) *Lasting Benefits: The Long-term Legacy of the Assisted Places Scheme for Assisted Place Holders*. Sutton Trust. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/ASSISTEDPLACESREPORT0310.pdf> (Accessed: 9 April 2024).

pledged to abolish it.²¹⁷ After Labour won the election, the Assisted Places Scheme was abolished in 1997 citing criticism that it favoured middle class pupils.

Return to attention: 2006-2013

Having abolished the Assisted Places Scheme and delivered their manifesto pledge, the New Labour government showed less interest in independent schools. This was aided by the fact that the Blair Government of 1997-2007 was tangibly warmer to the independent sector than the previous Wilson and Callaghan Labour Governments of 1974-1979, who were themselves warmer to the independent sector than the Wilson Government of 1964-1970. As a result, 1997-2006 saw a quiet decade politically for the independent schools sector.

Charities Act and public benefit requirement: 2006-2013

There was, however, an increasing return to political opposition to the sector in the 21st Century, with the most obvious starting point being the 2006 Charities Act, introduced by the Blair Government, which started a seven-year legal debate as to whether there would be a public benefit test independent schools would need to satisfy in order to have charitable status.

The Charities Act 2006 set out, for the first time, a statutory definition of ‘charity.’ (‘This is now included in the Charities Act 2011, a consolidation act which came into effect on 14 March 2012.’)²¹⁸ Before the Charities Act, independent schools could be charities for the advancement of education.²¹⁹ From 2006, the Charities Act also stated that a charity must be for the ‘public benefit.’²²⁰

In 2008 the Charity Commission then published guidance on their “‘public benefit” requirement’, alongside specific guidance on both the advancement of education for public benefit and charging fees within the context of demonstrating such benefits.²²¹

Following this, the Charity Commission introduced a set of ‘public benefit assessments,’ which included five independent schools. Two of the five schools were considered to not be meeting all aspects of the public benefit requirement and were therefore given one year to agree a plan with the Charity Commission to show how they would provide a ‘sufficient opportunity’ for pupils who could not afford the schools’ fees to still benefit from the work of the schools.²²²

²¹⁷ The Conservative Party (1997) *1997 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto*. Available at: <http://www.conservativemanifesto.com/1997/1997-conservative-manifesto.shtml> (Accessed: 17 September 2024). The Labour Party (1997) *New Labour because Britain deserves better*. Available at: <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml> (Accessed: 17 September 2024)

²¹⁸ Fairbairn, C. and Roberts, N. (2023) *Charitable status and independent schools*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05222/SN05222.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Richmond, T. and Regan, E. (2023) *Private matters: An investigation into independent schools and charitable status in England*. EDSK. Available at: <https://www.edsk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EDSK-Private-matters.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

This led to a successful judicial review brought forward by the ISC in 2010, which itself led to a consolidation act in October 2011 which stated that it was for the trustees of each charity, and not the Charity Commission, to decide how to demonstrate public benefit.²²³

The Tribunal also concluded that for public benefit, ‘there must be more than minimal or token benefit for the poor’.²²⁴

A government-commissioned review in 2012 stated there should be no statutory definition of ‘public benefit,’ and that public benefit could be demonstrated in various ways. After this, in 2013, the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee declared that Parliament, not the Charity Commission, should resolve the issues surrounding the criteria for charitable status and public benefit. They also deemed the Charities Act to be ‘critically flawed’ on the question of public benefit.²²⁵

After the tribunal published their ruling, the Charity Commission published new guidance on the public benefit requirements of charities.

Mounting pressure 2014-Present

Government and public benefit requirement: 2015-2017

From 2015 to 2017, independent schools faced very similar challenges (or, at least, pledges towards those challenges) from both the Labour and Conservative parties.

In their 2015 manifesto, the Labour Party stated that because ‘private schools currently benefit from generous state subsidies,’ (this was in reference to VAT exemptions, not actual subsidies) they should therefore:

‘[Do] more to contribute to raising standards in state education to justify receiving this subsidy. As a condition for continued business rate relief, private schools will be required to form a meaningful partnership with a school, or cluster of schools, in the state sector.’²²⁶

In the next year, after being appointed Prime Minister, Theresa May used her first statement in the role to address the ‘burning injustice[s]’ in British society – including that ‘if you’re at a state school, you’re less likely to reach the top professions than if you’re educated privately.’²²⁷

With this, in September 2016, the Government launched its consultation entitled ‘Schools that work for everyone,’ to set out its ‘ambition to create an education system that extends opportunity to everyone, not just the privileged few.’

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Fairbairn, C. and Roberts, N. (2023) *Charitable status and independent schools*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05222/SN05222.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²²⁵ Richmond, T. and Regan, E. (2023) *Private matters: An investigation into independent schools and charitable status in England*. EDSK. Available at: <https://www.edsk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EDSK-Private-matters.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²²⁶ Labour Party (2015) *The Labour Party Manifesto 2015*. Available at: <https://manifesto.deryn.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BritainCanBeBetter-TheLabourPartyManifesto2015.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²²⁷ May, T. (2016) *Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may>. (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

Two proposals were given for those ‘independent schools with the capacity and capability.’ It was said they should meet at least one of the two expectations ‘in recognition of the benefits of their charitable status’.

- The first was ‘To sponsor Academies or set up a new free school in the state sector’.
- The second was ‘To offer a certain proportion of places as fully funded bursaries to those who are insufficiently wealthy to pay fees’ – and this should ‘be considerably higher than that offered currently at most independent schools.’²²⁸

For the smaller independent schools with less capacity and capability, the consultation asked them to do one or more of the following to assist ‘in improving schools in the state sector’:

- ‘Provide direct school-to-school support with state schools’;
- Support the teaching of subjects which schools struggle to make viable;
- ‘Ensure their senior leaders become directors of multi-Academy trusts’;
- ‘Provide greater expertise and access to facilities’; and
- ‘Provide sixth form scholarships to a proportion of pupils in Year 11 at a local school’.²²⁹

The law did not change following this consultation, but the Government and the ISC did agree a ‘Joint Understanding’ on partnership working between state and independent schools.²³⁰ It stated:

‘This understanding demonstrates a commitment on the part of ISC associations, on behalf of member schools, to support the raising of educational standards in state schools where independent schools have the capability and capacity to provide expertise and resource and a commitment on the part of government to creating circumstances under which this can operate most effectively.’²³¹

The Conservatives did not win a majority in the 2017 General Election, but remained in Government in a minority government secured by Democratic Unionist Party confidence-and-supply support. This meant that independent schools dropped down the political agenda somewhat, and the government did not significantly follow-up on the ‘Joint Understanding’. This was furthered by the change in Prime Minister in 2019.

Call for abolition: 2019

One anomaly of the last two decades of political discourse around independent schools was that the 2019 Labour Party manifesto stated:

²²⁸ Department for Education (2016) *Schools that work for everyone: Government consultation*. Available at: https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/schools-that-work-for-everyone/supporting_documents/SCHOOLS%20THAT%20WORK%20FOR%20EVERYONE%20%20FINAL.PDF (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Fairbairn, C. and Roberts, N. (2023) *Charitable status and independent schools*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05222/SN05222.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²³¹ Department for Education (2018) *Joint understanding between DfE and Independent Schools Council (ISC)*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-understanding-between-dfe-and-independent-schools-council-isc/joint-understanding-between-dfe-and-independent-schools-council-isc> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

*'We will close the tax loopholes enjoyed by elite private schools and use that money to improve the lives of all children, and we will ask the Social Justice Commission to advise on integrating private schools and creating a comprehensive education system.'*²³²

Integrating private schools into a comprehensive education system was a clear call for abolition of independent schooling and was one pledge among many that indicated a significant shift to the left from the Labour Party for this General Election. The Conservative Party won the 2019 General Election and the Labour Party won 202 seats, 60 fewer than the 2017 General Election and the fewest seats that they had won in a General Election since 1935.

Charitable Status and VAT: 2021 to present

In September 2021, then Labour Party Leader Sir Keir Starmer told the *Sunday Mirror*:

*'Labour wants every parent to be able to send their child to a great state school. But improving them to benefit everyone costs money. That's why we can't justify continued charitable status for private schools.'*²³³

In September 2023, the party leader said that he no longer intended to remove charitable status of independent schools, and committed instead to the removal of the VAT exemption.²³⁴ He also said that he wants independent schools to 'thrive'.

*'Ending the tax break is not aimed at independent schools on any ideological grounds. It's simply trying to answer the question of, if, in your state schools, you don't have teachers in basic subjects like maths then are you going to do anything about it? And if so, how are you going to pay for it? That tax break will be used to support the recruitment of 6,500 new teachers into state secondary schools in subjects like maths. This is not intended as any reflection on independent schools, we want them to thrive and to work with them.'*²³⁵

After the Labour Party won the 2024 General Election, on 29 July 2024, the Chancellor announced that:

*'As of 1 January 2025, all education services and vocational training supplied by a private school, or a connected person, for a charge will be subject to VAT at the standard rate of 20%. Boarding services provided by a private school, or a connected person, will also be subject to VAT at 20%.'*²³⁶

²³² Labour Party (2019) *The Labour Party Manifesto 2019*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Real-Change-Labour-Manifesto-2019.pdf> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²³³ Aldridge, G. (2021) 'EXCLUSIVE: Keir Starmer vows to tax private schools £1.7bn to help poorer kids in major shake-up', *The Mirror*, 25 September. Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/keir-starmer-vows-tax-private-25072816> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²³⁴ Forrest, A. and Dalton, J. (2023) 'Labour U-turns on plan to strip private schools of charitable status', *The Independent*, 28 September. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-private-school-fees-tax-status-b2419785.html> (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

²³⁵ Martin, D. (2023) 'Keir Starmer wants private schools 'to thrive' despite pledge to scrap tax breaks', *The Telegraph*, 11 September. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/09/11/keir-starmer-private-schools-thrive-despite-vat-pledge/> (Accessed: 16 March 2024).

²³⁶ HMRC (2024) *Check if you must register for VAT if you receive private school fees*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-if-you-must-register-for-vat-if-you-receive-private-school-fees> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

This was then confirmed in the Autumn Budget 2024. This indicates a paradigm shift in the government treatment of independent schools, ending the over 600-year-old principle of not taxing independent education and something that was restricted while the UK was still a member of the EU.²³⁷ Independent schools fees have been subject to VAT since 1 January 2025.

Lessons

We see three consistent observations as to the nature of political pressure around the independent schools sector.

- Governments have generally acknowledged, or indeed appreciated, the quality and importance of having independent schools.
- There has been a desire from many governments to want to extract more benefit out of the independent schools sector, often on the grounds of fairness.
- This has generally been suggested through one of three mediums: partnership requirements; bursary expectations, either part-publicly funded or entirely privately funded; and taxation.
 - The last of these, in the form of VAT, is to be the initial approach of the new Labour government.

²³⁷ European Parliament (2015) *Application of VAT to educational services*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2015-013278_EN.html (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

6.4 Summary

- It is clear that independent schools do face a reputational challenge, and have faced acute political opposition in the past. Their current reputation, politically and publicly, seems to be one of overall warmth to their existence alongside a view that they are not doing enough for the general public.
- The public strongly agree, with seven times as many agreeing as disagreeing, that parents have a right to use independent schools; and they overwhelmingly view them as high quality.
- At the same time, independent schools are three times as likely to be viewed as 'exclusive', 'elitist', 'snobby' or 'entitled' as they are to be viewed as 'valuable', 'aspirational', 'exceptional' or 'leading'.
- This view, of quality but inequality, means that the policy proposal that would make the public most feel more favourably towards the independent schools sector is an expansion of bursaries/scholarships.
- Parental perspectives can be clustered into five groups, at least three of whom strongly display the view of 'quality but inequality', albeit prioritising the two differently. This presents a clear reputational challenge: to maintain quality and dampen inequality.
- Politically, opposition – especially from the Labour Party – is nothing new. An expectation to do more for the public – from both the Conservative and Labour parties – has been a theme of the 21st Century.
- There is political precedent to perceiving independent schools' public benefit as mediated through bursaries and partnerships.
- Generally speaking, however, Labour and Conservative leaders in the last three decades have wanted more from the independent schools sector, but for it to thrive. This has been most explicitly articulated by Theresa May and Keir Starmer.

Part 3:

Four futures to explore for independent schooling

In this part we bring together the principles of the introduction with the evidence of parts 1 and 2 of the Commission to propose the vision for what a successful independent school sector would look like, and we look at what areas of possible reform the sector should explore in order to achieve this.

*As discussed in the introduction, our vision for a successful independent sector is one that displays **excellence**, enjoys **cultural breadth**, and is **accessible, independent** and **collaborative**, and we look at how the sector can move ever closer to this vision over the long-term.*

Discussion: Unlocking the potential of the independent school sector

The purpose and functions of education for everyone

Independent schools are educational institutions. Considering the purpose of education is therefore important in order to develop a vision of what independent schools should contribute to education in England.

As discussed in Chapter 2, written evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee's parliamentary inquiry on the purpose and quality of education (conducted in 2015-16) illustrated clearly that, although the purposes of education are contested, they tend to revolve around passing onto children the **knowledge, skills and attitudes** to live fulfilled adult lives.²³⁸

First, as Barnaby Lenon argues, important knowledge can be thought of as:

*'That which allows pupils to understand the world, which provides a basis for developing related interests after school, and which leads directly or indirectly to employment.'*²³⁹

As both Ofsted and Cambridge Assessment have suggested, in preparing young people for the world of work and life, education is about equipping them with a good understanding of the core subjects such as English and mathematics so that they are in the strongest position when making decisions about their next steps in life.

Second, a broader purpose of education is to equip children with the essential life skills to function as adults in society. This is arguably the most abstract but is also often the most practical in terms of the knowledge and understanding necessary to function in day-to-day society.

Education also enables young people to understand the world better and therefore live in it more confidently and prosperously, and there is a 'core' body of knowledge necessary for this. It is also clear that if this 'core knowledge' is assumed, those children with more disadvantaged backgrounds may be left behind; schooling therefore attempts to respond to this.²⁴⁰

Third, the passing on of beneficial attitudes in education preserves and enhances culture.²⁴¹ Education preserves the traditions and norms of a society through passing on the understanding and appreciation of them. It also – as was highlighted in various written

²³⁸ UK Parliament, *Written evidence: Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry*, Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2303/purpose-and-quality-of-education-in-england-inquiry/publications/written-evidence/?page=4>. In particular, see contributions PQE0003 from Mr Barnaby Lenon, PQE0031 from Ofsted, PQE0046 from Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), PQE0081 from Cambridge Assessment, PQE0137 from National Foundation for Educational Research, and PQE0146 from Association of School and College Leaders (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

²³⁹ Ibid. PQE0003 from Mr Barnaby Lenon (Accessed: 9 July 2024).

²⁴⁰ Works & Days, *E.D. Hirsch on 'Cultural Literacy'*, Available at: <https://newlearningonline.com/new-learning/chapter-7/committed-knowledge-the-modern-past/e.d.hirsch-on-cultural-literacy> (Accessed: 14 June 2024)

²⁴¹ Department for Education (2015) *The purpose of education, Speech from the Rt Hon Nick Gibb*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-education> (Accessed: 12 June 2024).

evidence²⁴² – cultivates an ability to live fruitfully in community with others and helps form beneficial attitudes for students and society. Where it can lead to a love of learning and further independent study, education can also enhance culture through the advancement of knowledge and thought.

Also clear from this evidence was that another important function of education is enhancing our economy. Indeed, education is often viewed as the ‘engine of our economy’.²⁴³ Education’s ability to cultivate economic growth is generally achieved through two mechanisms. The first is increasing a population’s level of competency; making people more knowledgeable and better able to think for themselves and to problem solve. It includes ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills. The second is ensuring efficient employment through assorting by ability, allowing educational attainment to act as a signal of a person’s strengths in different areas. This helps job ‘matching’, improving productivity. Whether or not this is done well in the current system, it is a function of assessment and examinations.

The contribution of independent schooling to education

So, what does a successful independent schools system contribute to education more broadly? We saw in the Commission that its first purpose is the same as it is for state schools – to further education and to facilitate the various opportunities that this enables. It is the part of schooling done through independent initiative and it adds to the landscape of schooling.

Enjoying freedom through independence

In terms of what is unique in concept about the independent sector, it provides a sector within the school system that is relatively free from government. Free to teach what it chooses, free to employ who it chooses and free to fund itself independently of the government. This final one includes the fundamentally important freedom to charge fees. Together, this financial and educational independence both facilitate and demand independence of thought. Independent schools are uniquely able to carve out their own paths, and they must also provide something different in order to be viable.

This freedom offers its own functions. In particular, it offers parents the freedom to invest in their children’s schooling. This freedom is linked to education being an act of passing on from one generation to the next. It facilitates an important channel whereby the decision over what a child should be taught can be retained by parents and schools, without overarching government control.

²⁴² UK Parliament. *Written evidence: Purpose and quality of education in England inquiry*. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2303/purpose-and-quality-of-education-in-england-inquiry/publications/written-evidence/?page=4>. In particular, see contributions PQE0003 from Mr Barnaby Lenon, PQE0031 from Ofsted, PQE0046 from Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), PQE0081 from Cambridge Assessment, PQE0137 from National Foundation for Educational Research, and PQE0146 from Association of School and College Leaders. (Accessed: 9 July 2024)

²⁴³ Department for Education (2015) *The purpose of education, Speech from the Rt Hon Nick Gibb*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-purpose-of-education> (Accessed: 12 June 2024).

Independent schools' relative freedom from state control also offers clear educational advantages. It offers the ability for innovation in schooling through diversity of ideas. The exploration and testing of new and different curricular and teaching methods can help to improve educational standards more widely.

Broadening reputation and economic footprint

In terms of what the independent sector offers in practice, we see many distinct economic advantages from which the country at large benefits. First, the independent sector has a reputational function: it is well reputed internationally and this provides benefit to England's international standing, in the same way Britain's exceptional universities do. Second, the independent sector provides a direct economic benefit in terms of its approximately £7 billion Gross Value Add²⁴⁴ and provides almost £5 billion in direct savings to public finances in terms of state school places not used.²⁴⁵ Third, it provides economic output in terms of the value that its alumni provide to the economy, both through filling particular professions and generally higher salaries, both of which were discussed in Chapters 2 and 5.

Delivering excellence and accessibility

Independent schools are not funded by the state but by private individuals seeking preferred education. To pay for schooling is a prosocial act; it is individual actors freely furthering education. It does, however, mean that independent schools must generate their own income, and this will inevitably require fees.

Excellence always comes with advantage in education, especially in ranking-based assessments such as GCSEs and A-Levels, as attending a high-quality school brings better chances of good outcomes. In the case of independent schools, the six to seven per cent of children who attend them, on average, have significantly better academic outcomes at age 16, 18 and university level.²⁴⁶

The argument that this distribution of outcomes is unfair tends to focus on the way that academic results rank students. It can be that any advantage, any better education, received by some children in a freer market without state intervention is viewed as unfair, but this is a more complex social question. In terms of ranking, the role of assessments, as mentioned, is to allow students to signal their relative ability, as compared with their peers, to prospective employers, through qualifications. This is skewed if some students receive more help than their peers in attaining or representing these qualifications. It is best if all children get a fair chance at the best outcomes.

²⁴⁴ Oxford Economics (2022) *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy*. Available at: https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC_report_2022_FINAL_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 2 February 2024).

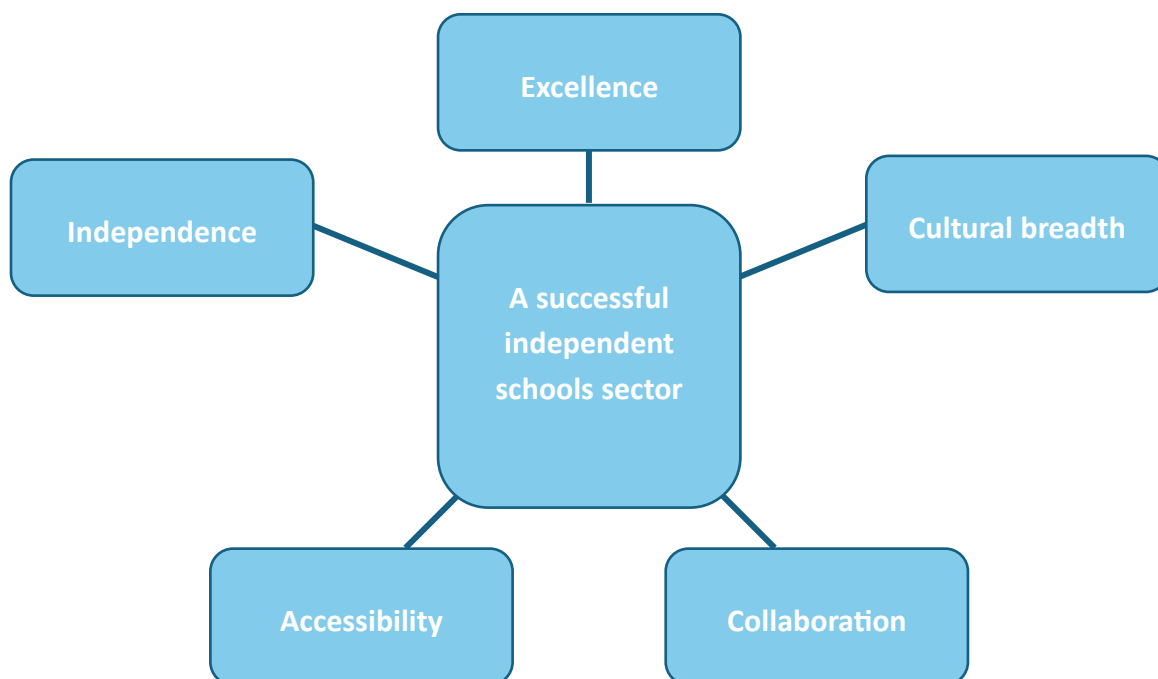
²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ofqual. *GCSE outcomes by centre type*. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/GCSE/CentreType/> (Accessed: 2 April 2024). Ofqual (2023) *A level outcomes by centre type*. Available at: <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/CentreType/> (Accessed: 3 October 2023). HEFCE (2015) *Young participation in higher education A-levels and similar qualifications*.

Here it is important that improving education is a good thing. One school improving – all else being equal – has a benefit that outweighs the side-effect it causes of variation across schools.

All schools being theoretically perfect would be ideal, but this is not realistically possible. The next best thing is fair access to the best schools.

Aspirational values for a successful independent school sector



As discussed in the introduction, the Commission has five aspirational values for a successful independent schools sector. We can evaluate these values by considering the evidence presented in the Commission.

Excellence

The independent sector displays excellence, which we can see in at least three ways.

First, the achievement of the independent schools sector is significant. DfE data shows that three quarters of the top 100 schools and nearly four in five of the top 50 schools by A-Level results are independent schools.²⁴⁷

In science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, independent schools lead the country to a considerable extent, especially at A-Level. For two particularly notable examples, in chemistry, 51 per cent of ISC pupils achieve As or above compared with 28 per

²⁴⁷ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

cent at state schools;²⁴⁸ in maths, 58 per cent of ISC pupils achieve As or above compared with 38 per cent at state schools.²⁴⁹ They also lead comfortably in further maths, biology, physics and computer science.²⁵⁰

Moving away from STEM, we see the excellence independent schools show in sport. In the 2012, 2016, 2021 and 2024 Olympics, 33 per cent of Great Britain's gold medal winners were independently educated.²⁵¹

Second, the sector is viewed as high-quality by the public. Polling undertaken as part of the Commission found overwhelming public agreement that independent schools have better facilities (69 per cent agreed whilst just seven per cent disagreed), a better range of extracurricular activities (63 per cent agreed whilst just seven per cent disagreed), better university application help (62 per cent agreed whilst just 10 per cent disagreed), better support to especially gifted students (58 per cent agreed whilst just 10 per cent disagreed) and a higher standard of teaching (50 per cent agreed whilst just 16 per cent disagreed) compared to state schools. There was also strong agreement that independent schools give students an advantage because they are generally better schools (66 per cent agreed).

Third, the sector's appeal to international students is a picture of its international acclaim:

'We work [with students from] South America, America, Switzerland, lots from the Far East – and it's quite hard to overstate, particularly for people who are unfamiliar with the sector, just how popular and impressive it is' – Expert witness.

Analysis from economic forecasters, Oxford Economics found that, in 2021:

*'39,000 jobs and £0.6 billion in tax revenue were supported by payments made to ISC schools by non-British pupils, taking the direct, indirect, and induced impacts into account.'*²⁵²

This excellence can always be extended. The independent sector has shown itself to be socially transformative for disadvantaged pupils over the decades. This was clear for recipients of the Assisted Places Scheme, as shown by Sutton Trust research,²⁵³ and has

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ For lists of individual athletes/Great Britain teams who won gold medals at 2020 Olympics, please see: Olympics (2021) *Great Britain's Tokyo 2020 Olympics medal winners - the final list*. Available at: <https://olympics.com/en/news/great-britain-tokyo-2020-olympics-medals> (Accessed: 28 March 2024). For 2016, see: Adams, T. (2016) *Olympics Rio 2016: All Great Britain's 67 medals – which sports and athletes were most successful?* Available at: https://www.eurosport.com/olympics/rio/2016/olympics-rio-2016-all-great-britain-s-66-medals-which-sports-were-most-successful_sto5733313/story.shtml (Accessed: 28 March 2024). For 2012, see: Nakrami, S. and Steinberg, J. (2016) 'Team GB's 29 gold medals from London 2012: where are those Olympians now?', *The Guardian*, 2 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2016/aug/02/team-gb-gold-medals-london-2012-where-are-olympians-now> (Accessed: 28 March 2024). For 2024, see: Sky Sports News (2024) *Olympics 2024: Team GB gold medal winners in Paris plus full medal table*. Available at: <https://www.skysports.com/olympics/news/15234/13193829/olympics-2024-team-gb-gold-medal-winners-in-paris-plus-full-medal-table> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

²⁵² Oxford Economics (2022) *The impact of independent schools on the UK economy*. Available at: https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISC_report_2022_FINAL_WEB.pdf (Accessed: 27 June 2024).

²⁵³ Power, S. et al. (2013) *Lasting benefits: The Long-term Legacy of the Assisted Places Scheme for Assisted Place Holders*, Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/LastingBenefits2013.pdf> (Accessed: 3 April 2024).

more recently been clear for looked-after children on Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation (RNCSF) scholarships.²⁵⁴

Cultural breadth

We see a clear cultural breadth in the independent sector. We see this in terms of religious character: just 43 per cent of independent school pupils attend a school without a religious character. Christian, Muslim and Jewish schools all thrive in the independent sector.²⁵⁵ The diversity is also presented in terms of uncommon subjects: over 20 per cent of all A-Level entries in modern languages (Spanish, French, German and ‘others’); classical studies; further maths; music, drama and theatre studies; and economics are from students at ISC schools.²⁵⁶ The evidence we have also suggests that in subjects such as maths, modern languages and sciences, independent school teachers are as much as 30 per cent more likely to have a specialist degree in the subject that they are teaching.²⁵⁷

It is also present in the diversity of those who are independently educated. At ISC schools, 42 per cent of students are of an ethnic minority,²⁵⁸ slightly above the 39 per cent of students across all schools in England that are of an ethnic minority.²⁵⁹ In terms of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), ISC schools provide SEND support for 20 per cent of their pupils,²⁶⁰ and non-association independent schools to 35 per cent of their pupils,²⁶¹ above the 18 per cent of all pupils in England.²⁶² We also see thriving all girls and all boys schools, with over 320 single sex schools across the whole independent sector.²⁶³

Notwithstanding this, there are challenges in terms of the cultural diversity of the sector. One is maintaining distinctiveness alongside excellence. Ofsted inspections provide some light here; whilst just 10 per cent of state schools in England are rated ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted,²⁶⁴ 19 per cent of non-association independent

²⁵⁴ Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation (2023), *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*, Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

²⁵⁵ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

²⁵⁶ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

²⁵⁷ Seldon, A. (2014) *Schools United: Ending the divide between independent and state*. Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Publication-Schools-United-Ending-the-divide-between-independent-and-state-Anthony-Seldon.pdf> (Accessed: 8 March 2024).

²⁵⁸ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

²⁵⁹ Department for Education (2024) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

²⁶⁰ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

²⁶¹ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

²⁶² Ofsted (2024) *Non-association independent schools inspections and outcomes: management information*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/non-association-independent-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-management-information> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

²⁶³ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

²⁶⁴ Ofsted (2024) *Main findings: State-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 December 2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2023/main-findings-state-funded-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-as-at-31-december-2023#schools-at-their-most-recent-inspection> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

schools – often the most culturally distinctive of all schools – are.²⁶⁵ Isolating non-association independent Jewish schools, 73 per cent are rated ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’.²⁶⁶

Another is maintaining viability for distinctive independent schools. Consultation evidence suggests that those independent schools that prioritise distinctiveness tend to have lower fees and tend to educate less affluent families, making them especially susceptible to cost shocks, such as the imposition of VAT on school fees. This represents a challenge to the most distinctive and diverse parts of the sector.

Accessibility

Much work has gone into the accessibility of independent schools for a long time, and fee assistance has grown over the long-term. In 2004, 23.0 per cent of pupils received some fee assistance from their independent school; by 2014, 27.7 per cent did; and by 2024, 28.5 per cent of pupils received some fee assistance from their school.²⁶⁷ From 2014 to 2024, the overall increase in school fee assistance was 62 per cent, a little faster than fee growth.²⁶⁸

These numbers are promising; however, they do not change the overarching observation that independent schooling could be more accessible. In 2024, the average annual ISC day school day fee in England exceeded £18,500.²⁶⁹ Even this number excludes all boarding schools.

This average does not capture the range in the sector – almost a quarter charge under £13,000 a year and 60 schools charge less than £6,000 a year.²⁷⁰ It also does not capture means-tested provision to improve accessibility. In 2024, just under 5.5 per cent of all ISC pupils were on means-tested bursaries or scholarships amounting to at least 25 per cent of the total fee, and just under 2.5 per cent were on means-tested assistance equal to at least 75 per cent of the overall fee.²⁷¹ This is commendable, but more steps could be taken to move the dial on the aggregate accessibility of the independent schools sector; means-tested fee assistance from schools does not significantly impact almost 95 per cent of pupils.

There is also a geographical accessibility challenge for the independent schools sector. Independent schools educate 10.2 per cent of pupils in London and the South East, but just 4.7 per cent of pupils in the rest of England.²⁷² In 37 local authorities, including

²⁶⁵ Ofsted (2024) *Non-association independent schools inspections and outcomes: management information*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/non-association-independent-schools-inspections-and-outcomes-management-information> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ Independent Schools Council (2014) *ISC Census 2014*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/2466/2014_annualcensus_isc.pdf (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

²⁶⁸ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

Nottinghamshire and Liverpool, less than 2.0 per cent of pupils are educated independently.²⁷³

How to make the independent schools sector more accessible is a defining question of the coming decades. From 1980 to 2016, independent school fees doubled compared to personal income at the 95th percentile and tripled compared to inflation. In the eight years since 2016, this growth has significantly slowed, and day school day fees have increased in real terms by just seven per cent during this period. But this still means faster growth than inflation. If this continues for another generation, the long-term future of the sector's viability in attracting fees from the existing cohorts of parents looks uncertain, and the future for its accessibility will be challenging.

Exploring how the long-term direction of accessibility could be altered in the decades to come is a fundamental question for the sector to address. The independent sector has adapted in order to survive and thrive over many tumultuous times for centuries, but the specific challenge of affordability has arguably never been so acute.

Independence

Our consultation suggested there are two pillars of independence from the sector's perspective. The independence to carve out a school's own educational path, and the independence provided to parents to have the choice to pay for their children's education.

For the former, the Commission's consultation found that the cornerstone of independence of thought is curricular autonomy; independent schools having independence over what they teach. This is necessary for creativity and is key to the innovative work that goes on in the sector. This curricular autonomy is fundamental to a successful independent schools sector in the future. The latter of these – parents having the choice to pay for their children's education – could be expanded further with an increase in accessibility.

Much of the Commission's consultation evidence found that innovation is generally considered to be an under-utilised opportunity.

Collaboration

One of the great innovations of the independent schools sector in the 21st Century is the rise of partnership work. It offers an opportunity for independent schools to embed in the community and the wider education system that which they do best. Promising signs are present: there is tremendous willing and enthusiasm within the independent sector to partner with state schools, there is political precedent for this to be a coherent initiative from the 'Joint Understanding',²⁷⁴ and there are measures of anecdotal evidence of the fruits of this.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Department for Education (2016) *Schools that work for everyone: Government consultation*. Available at: https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/schools-that-work-for-everyone/supporting_documents/SCHOOLS%20THAT%20WORK%20FOR%20EVERYONE%20%20FINAL.PDF (Accessed: 4 January 2024).

The potential here, especially with improvement in technology, is considerable, but it is yearning for greater system-wide coordination.

The ISC report that in the 2023 calendar year, 1,068 ISC schools participated in 9,248 partnership activities, with 43 schools participating in partnership activities with over 50 state schools over the course of the year.²⁷⁵

Notwithstanding this, the definition and reporting of partnerships can be improved. It is clear that sporting fixtures and other educational events, alongside facility sharing, account for a large amount of partnership activity. However, it is not clear or accurately recorded how much resource – both financially and in terms of time and expertise – goes into partnerships, it is not clear what the state school perception of partnership is, and it is not clear what the impact of partnership activity is, to name three.

It is also clear that the level of state school participation is lower than it could optimally be, and that the burden of expectation of partnership activity can not solely fall on independent schools.

Part 3 explores how partnership activity could be improved, and how it could be made more rigorous, more impactful and more collaborative between the independent and state school sectors.

Rising to meet ambition and provide opportunities: Four futures to explore

These credible aspirational values which have been repeated time and again throughout the evidence gathering process of the Commission leave us with four futures to explore, four possible paths that the Commission suggests may lead to a successful independent schools sector for the next generation:

Chapter 7 explores the future of independent-state school partnerships, seeking a collaborative and world-class sector. It does this in four incremental ways. First, looking at how independent sector-wide standards and the normalising of partnership reporting and measurement could increase clarity around partnerships. Second, how the DfE might coordinate partnership activity at a regional level in the medium-term. Third, how this could lay the foundation for integrating Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and continued professional development (CPD) across the sectors.

Chapter 8 explores the idea of independent schools as community hubs, and looks at how a more holistic understanding of partnership can lead to a vision of independent schools delivering on society's greatest needs by unleashing the opportunities of independence. It first looks to understand what independent schools as community hubs means, then looks at a series of medium-term opportunities schools could pursue within this understanding. Finally, it looks at a long-term opportunity for coordination within the ISC in this future.

²⁷⁵ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

Chapter 9 explores specialist and mid-market independent schooling. The cultural breadth and accessibility of the independent sector depends on schools that are different and schools that are affordable. The state and independent schools sectors currently exist with a large gap: there are very few schools indeed which charge fees and are not free at point of entry but for which these fees are less than around £13,000 a year. This gap presents an emerging opportunity as so many parents would love to invest in their children's education but few can set aside as much as £13,000 a year – let alone the £18,000 annual average in the sector. This chapter explores how this mid-market could be vitalised.

Chapter 10 explores how independent schools can level the playing field for the most disadvantaged children in our society. The way that world-class independent schooling can transform the lives and opportunities of disadvantaged children has been demonstrated and the vision is to expand that. It also provides access to the independent sector for the most disadvantaged children. This chapter looks at how this vision could be realised in the long-term.

These four futures to explore seek to capture the fact that the appropriate course of action will be different for different schools in the sector. It has been clear since Chapter 1.1 that in a sector where schools vary so much in size, resource and educational context, a one-size-fits-all policy approach is unwise. It is also clear that a one-size-fits-all approach would damage the independence that is fundamental to the sector.

The reforms discussed follow an incremental structure. They start with low-cost recommendations mostly dependent on independent initiative, and then look towards larger, long-term structural changes that could be made if the initial steps are successful. Ultimately, both the government and the independent schools sector should want to work with each other in a way that is mutually beneficial. This being done at an institutional level depends on healthy roots being grown in the next few years.

The large-scale reforms largely come with an initial cost to the public purse, but these reforms can and should be financially astute if executed correctly. The independent schools sector shrinking would be highly costly to government, and it growing and working with state schools to mutually improve would both save government funds. However, as with all things in education, this would be an investment with shorter-term costs and longer-term benefits. Education is and always has been known to be a profitable investment for government if done well, especially improving the education of the most disadvantaged. Also, as is discussed, government policies which can increase the amount of parental investment in schooling will increase overall education investment by more than they cost.

Chapter 7.

Enhancing partnership with state schools

Over the next generation, the vision is for partnership between independent and state schools to embed itself into the fabric of the school system. This long-term thinking needs to be married with short-term pragmatic thinking as to the first steps towards enhancing partnerships and medium-term thinking about removing current structural obstacles.

This chapter starts by building on Schools Partnership Alliance research to explore a possible template for partnership reporting. Expanding the benefit of partnership work depends on improving its quality. Improving the quality of partnership work is best done with proper appraisal, which in turn depends on effective measurement.

The chapter then looks at a three-stage proposal to a vision for enhancing partnership between independent and state schools. The first step involves looking at the implementation of reporting standards in the independent schools sector. The second step then looks at regional partnership databases, before the chapter finally looks at specific avenues for DfE cross-sector coordination in the long-term.

Recommendations to enhance partnership with state schools

- *Introduce a partnership reporting template for Schools Together contributions: Independent-state school partnership can tighten its coherence and clarity with one template that all partnerships follow and report within. This would also open the door to an accreditation system.*
 - *DfE regional directors to launch regional partnership databases for matching supply with demand: This coherence and clarity of reporting would allow a simplified partnership opportunities and ideas-matching system through publishing partnership opportunities on regional DfE partnership databases.*
 - *Joining up teacher training and CPD: Government commitment to joining up across the sectors' Initial Teacher Training (ITT) schemes with placements visits and shared CPD within each region.*
-

7.1 A four-type understanding of partnership

Defining partnership

The Schools Partnership Alliance define partnership as follows:

*'[School partnerships are] an ongoing collaborative relationship between schools, aligning their interests around a common vision and combining their complementary resources and competencies, to deliver benefit to each of the partners.'*²⁷⁶

Roughly speaking, this suggests four characteristics of partnership beyond any collaborative activity between state and independent schools.

The first is that it is 'ongoing'; it must be a sustained relationship. This is sensible and comes with a clear implication for partnership measurement. If partnerships are ongoing relationships, they must not be defined at an activity level, **they must be defined at a participants level**. The partnership accounting discussed in Chapter 5 fails to meet this principle by focusing on the incidence of activities in its reporting. This is because of how schools currently record partnership work. This also provides a clear opportunity to be much more explicit about the incidence of partnership activity in the state schools sector.

The second is that the partnership entails a 'common vision'; that **there must be an understanding between the involved parties as to the purpose of the partnership**. This is an excellent threshold, but a challenging one to meet. It allows the partners autonomy in defining the purpose of the partnership – something that is important for partnerships to thrive in each of the variety of contexts schools find themselves in.

It also demands proper coordination and strategy between the participating schools. This comes with an impetus on state schools to engage properly with independent schools, and with an imperative for independent schools to offer genuine constructive partnership of mutual learning.

The third is that the partnership involves 'combining' 'complementary' resources of respective parties; partnerships are best when they utilise resources from all parties. This predominately exists within the 'common vision' element of partnership but it also demands – especially when considered alongside the first characteristic (ongoing) – the **sustained allocation of resources from both parties to the sustained partnership**.

And the fourth is that partnerships must 'deliver benefits to each of the partners.' This is basic but essential for improvements in partnership; **partnership work must have evidence of mutual benefit**. That is true of defined desired benefit (as in 'common vision') and of assessing whether that benefit was realised.

This is a strong definition and the sector can be ambitious about putting it into practice.

²⁷⁶ School Partnerships Alliance (2023) *School Partnerships for Impact Guide*. Available at: https://schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SPA_GUIDE-2023.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

The rationale for partnerships

The educational motivation

The educational motivation for partnership activity is clear and wide ranging and discussed in detail in Chapter 2. There are all sorts of educational enhancements for both sectors that coordinated activity between schools can generate. The four most obvious are first, providing a wider and better taught curriculum by sharing students and teachers to fill classes of uncommon subjects and ensure quality. Second, allowing schools across the sectors to have exceptional facilities by having access to the joint stock of a number of schools' resources. Third, for schools to have much better career guidance programmes and university admissions help. Fourth, the ability, through the sharing of ideas, expertise and training, to improve the quality of teaching in both the state and independent sector. The first of these applies as much to sports teams and music as it does subjects like Latin and Art History.

There is also a clear cultural motivation for the independent and state school sectors to cooperate. The mixing of children from different schools – especially when the schools have, on average, different socioeconomic contexts – can be extremely beneficial to all if done in the right way.

The political motivation

As discussed in Chapter 2, one question around partnership work is that it is only done to prove public benefit in response to criticism around the charitable status of independent schools.

'To what extent do you think that partnership working is only done as a consequence of charitable status and the public benefit expectations set by charity law, the courts and the Charity Commission? [And] if it is in fact only charity-owned schools that are engaging in partnership working, then what risk do they consider there to be that the loss of the benefits of charitable status, the tax benefits of charitable status, could result in a reduction in partnership working?' – Consultation evidence [from industry].

This, however, could lead to a flawed understanding of a legitimate political motivation for schools to engage in well defined, measured and reported partnership work.

Successive governments have made clear that strong partnership work can be a vehicle towards an improved relationship with government and an improved political reputation. This is a substantial opportunity for the independent sector – as discussed in depth in Chapter 6. There is clear evidence from the polling and political history that within both the general public and Westminster, there is a willingness to be fond of independent schools if they are to demonstrate – or thoroughly report – the partnership work that they do and their commitment to working with the state.

Four types of partnership

The School Partnership Alliance defines four types of partnership activity, that are called 'Connection', 'Collaboration', 'Alliance' and 'Integration'. The Commission also refers to them as types 1 to 4, respectively.

Their explanation of these types is intuitive, well evidenced and extremely useful – although for understandable reasons, not tightly defined. This section seeks to develop the four types as they are explained to a set of distinct characteristics of each type, such that the type of a given partnership could be clearly identified.

These partnerships are distinguished according to their participants and sustainability (relating to the 'ongoing' characteristic of a partnership); leadership, design and communication (relating to the 'common vision' characteristic of a partnership); financing (relating to the 'allocation' characteristic of a partnership); and impact (relating to the 'mutual benefit' characteristic of a partnership).

Type 1: 'Connection'

A type 1 partnership can be understood as a relationship that is developing into a partnership. It cannot be understood as a partnership itself over the long-term, as it does not properly meet the seven characteristics, but it can be understood as the intermediary step between schools having no relationship and a partnership.

The most common and understandable example of a type 1 partnership is the sharing of a swimming pool. This will typically involve independent schools that have a swimming pool which is not in constant use offering the spare slots to local state schools, which will then have the opportunity to use that pool as part of their teaching.

Generally speaking, in a type 1 partnership, there will not be a defined purpose as to what the swimming pool is to be used for by the state schools beyond the basic theme of it being good to have swimming lessons. There will also generally not be any pooling of expertise in terms of swimming coaching or swimming teams between the schools, and there will not be further enhancing elements such as galas or competitions between the students at the respective schools.

Type 2: 'Collaboration'

Collaborations are perhaps the most common form of partnership work. A good example of a collaboration from the *School Partnerships for Impact Guide* is a state and independent school putting on a dramatic production together. This will involve both schools utilising teachers, students and facilities for a shared and defined purpose with a measurable outcome for all schools involved.

The appropriate type of partnership will be different for different independent schools, but to ensure all partnerships are at least collaborative will be a target for many. It is not always commensurate to strive for more, but schools interested in partnership should not generally

settle for connections. Collaborations are mutual, trusting, genuine and purposeful, but they are still small scale for both schools. They are productive and worthwhile, but it would not be accurate to describe them as transformational.

Type 3: ‘Alliance’

For many independent schools for whom partnership is a priority, the ultimate target is to participate in an alliance, a type 3 partnership. Alliances are targeted, strategic partnerships, and educationally effective for all participating schools.

An example of a type 3 partnership would be a group of independent and state schools coming together to collectively enhance the GCSE offering at all of their schools with group GCSE Latin classes. These would occur annually in perpetuity and would be an important component of how the state and independent schools market themselves and specialise their activities.

There is a real sense in which the term ‘partnership’ most applies to type 2 and type 3 partnerships. Type 1 connections are better understood as bridges or starting points, and type 4 integrated models, as we will see, are nearer the point of merged activities.

Type 4: ‘Integration’

Type 4 integrations are the most involved form of cross-school coordination. There are currently only a handful of type 4 integrations and they involve, as in the name, highly integrated management of several schools, such that they almost exist as one; able to each be autonomous and distinctive schools whilst having complete and constant access to each other’s strength, expertise and assets.

The clearest example of a type 4 partnership, as has been discussed in Chapter 5, is the King Edward VI Foundation in Birmingham, where 14 schools – 12 state and two independent – run as one body, and standards across the schools have been transformed.

Table 7.1 provides a detailed explanation, across seven indicators, as to how a partnership could be allocated a type.

Table 7.1: A seven-characteristic summary of type of partnership

	Type 1: Connection	Type 2: Collaboration	Type 3: Alliance	Type 4: Integration
Participants	Generally bilateral, that is, activity that goes on does so between two parties.	Typically involve three or fewer schools. The agreement between these participants is likely to be formal and defined.	Typically involve at least four schools. Many alliances involve as many as 10 schools.	Will have a number of schools involved, and they will be so closely partnered that they can be understood as one entity.

Sustainability	Not sustained at a participants level; it is instead designed according to spare capacity that may or may not be there year on year.	Would be expected to have evidence of year-on-year continuity. Crucially, it would exist at a participants level, not a spare capacity level.	This partnership must be annual and sustainable.	The partnership is significant enough that it ensures the sustainability of the schools, as well as the schools ensuring the sustainability of the partnership.
Leadership	This will typically not have evidence of coordinated leadership from either side.	This will have genuine leadership, teachers for whom partnership work is a clear part of their role.	Unlike a type 2 partnership, a type 3 partnership must be reaching the Senior Leadership Team of all parties.	Participants will have shared leadership, they may even have one board overseeing the partnership, and a single CEO.
Design	An agreed understanding of exactly what the purpose for each side of partnership is, and what the strategy for the partnership is, will likely not be evident.	The partnership has a jointly agreed understanding of the purpose of the partnership and the strategy for implementation.	The co-design should have a jointly agreed purpose, strategy for implementation and measurement of its effectiveness.	The design of the partnership tends towards being the same as the strategy of the schools; the distinct purpose of the partnership becomes increasingly blurred.
Communication	There generally will not be evidence of consistent meetings between partners.	This partnership will involve frequent communication and meeting from the relevant parties at each school.	Communication will involve frequent meeting and communication from the <i>senior leadership</i> of the participants.	Headteachers at the respective schools in type 4 partnerships often reach the point of being colleagues.
Financing	Will typically have no budget allocated to them; they will make use of existing spare capacity.	Will have a proper funding allocation for at least one party, as it will constitute a proper part of the operations of the school.	Will have an allocation in the budget, from all parties involved.	The finances of the participating schools will typically be partially integrated.
Impact	Any benefit will normally go unmeasured. There will be no defined desired benefit nor any	The impact will have two important characteristics: it will be mutual and	Like with type 2 partnerships, the desired impact will be defined and measured. However, there	The question of impact often becomes the question of aggregate school

	assessment of whether this was realised.	it will be measured.	will also be targets that are annually reviewed.	performance of members.
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Source: Civitas analysis of Schools Partnership Alliance (2023) *School Partnerships for Impact Guide*. Available at: https://schoolpartnershipsalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SPA_GUIDE-2023.pdf (Accessed: 15 August 2024).

These understandings facilitate a number of ways in which school relationships can be defined as to their partnership type.

In each of these seven characteristics, the distinction between types 1, 2, 3 and 4 is clear and the place of each partnership is easily identified. This typology facilitates an opportunity to clearly and simply articulate independent-state school partnerships.

In terms of enhancing the partnership work and its marketing within the independent sector, trying to ensure that independent schools align their reporting and understanding of partnership according to a common understanding – such as the one this section has outlined – will be fundamentally important. A large amount of effort has already gone into partnerships, but this has not had a major influence on the reputation of the independent school sector from the outside. Coordination can transform this.

This typology would of course be one that could be applied to an accreditation system for partnerships in the medium- to long-term.

Case study: Scottish Charity Test

The Scottish Charity Test, as assessed by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR), is the closest example of a public benefit test for the English independent school context.

The Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 introduced a new test for a body to register as a charity in Scotland. The charity test had two elements: first, the purposes of the body must be exclusively charitable, and second that the body must provide public benefit, either in Scotland or elsewhere, that outweighs private benefit to a selected group (in this case families and pupils). The Act tasked the OSCR to perform these assessments. The test also considered whether access to any charity was too restrictive, such as through the existence of fees, requiring schools to widen access by enhancing means-tested fee assistance.

The Scottish independent sector is around five per cent of the size of the English independent sector. There are 71 members of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS) educating 28,876 pupils, compared to 1,339 members of the ISC in England educating 512,588 pupils.²⁷⁷ Only 34 of these 71 SCIS schools are members of the ISC. This makes the

²⁷⁷ Scottish Council of Independent Schools (2024) *Facts & Figures: Annual Census*. Available at: <https://www.scis.org.uk/facts-and-figures> (Accessed: 2 December 2024).

administrative burden of a charity test very different, even accounting for the fact that around 30 per cent of ISC schools do not have charitable status.²⁷⁸

Fees are also comparatively lower, with average annual day school day fees at £15,400 in Scotland, and £18,600 in England,²⁷⁹ and there are just 19 boarding schools in the SCIS.

The introduction of the charity test has ensured a significant rise in financial assistance from Scottish independent schools. Means-tested fee assistance almost trebled in nominal terms from around £13 million in 2009/10 to £33 million in 2020/21, just prior to the impact of Covid-19.²⁸⁰ In the same period, means-tested fee assistance rose only 78 per cent across the whole of the ISC, from £255 million in 2009/10 to £455 million in 2020/21.²⁸¹ Evaluating from this perspective, the public benefit test has been highly successful in improving access to the independent sector.

There is also good reason to believe that collaboration in the Scottish independent sector has been improved. There are similar issues to England of limited and confusing partnership reporting, but there is now assessment of partnership reporting that takes place, and it is consistently verified by the OSCR as legitimate charitable endeavour.²⁸² Wider forms of public benefit, such as sharing of facilities, resources and staff are taken into consideration.²⁸³

Politically, however, this substantial rise in means-tested fee assistance over the 2010s did not discourage the inclusion of independent schools in the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act, which was passed in 2020.²⁸⁴ This removed eligibility for Charity Relief from mainstream charitable independent schools only – 50 of over 24,000 charities in Scotland. In addition to this, our polling of the general public found that Scottish respondents were consistently more hostile to independent schooling than English respondents and more supportive of the abolition of charitable status for independent schools than English respondents.²⁸⁵ This suggests a different interpretation of the charity test – an incrementalist one away from independence.

The Scottish case study is therefore both encouraging and cautionary. The charity test shows that regulatory changes can stimulate improvements in the accessibility and collaboration of

²⁷⁸ ISC (2024) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 29 October 2024) p22.

²⁷⁹ ISC (2024) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 29 October 2024).

²⁸⁰ Edward, J. (2023) *The Scottish independent school sector*. Available at: <https://independentschoolmanagement.co.uk/features/the-scottish-independent-school-sector/> (Accessed: 29 October 2024).

²⁸¹ ISC (2010) *ISC Census 2010*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/2456/2010_annualcensus_isc.pdf (Accessed: 29 October 2024). And ISC (2021) *ISC Census and Annual Report 2021*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/7496/isc_census_2021_final.pdf (Accessed: 29 October 2024).

²⁸² OSCR (2021) *Meeting the Charity Test: Guidance for applicants and existing charities*. Available at: <https://www.oscr.org.uk/media/4150/2021-03-23-meet-the-charity-test-updated-public-and-private-benefit-sections-final.pdf> (Accessed: 29 October 2024).

²⁸³ OSCR Scottish Charity Regulator. *Fee-charging schools, public benefit and charitable status*. Available at: <https://www.scis.org.uk/assets/Uploads/fee-charging-schools-public-benefit-and-charitable-status.pdf> (Accessed: 2 December 2024).

²⁸⁴ UK Government (2020) *Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Act 2020*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2020/4> (Accessed: 29 October 2024).

²⁸⁵ Civitas polling, see Appendix 3.

the independent school sector, but also that government regulation on public benefit increases oversight and therefore constitutes a risk to the independent school sector that supersedes the actual consequences of the regulation itself. It is also not clear whether an organisation like the OSCR could be realistically introduced for the English independent school sector, which is some 20 times larger than its Scottish equivalent.

Together, these lessons suggest that improvements in the reporting of partnership activity within the sector, coordinated independently – and not by government regulation – would be a compelling direction for the sector to take. They also demonstrate that, given space and opportunity, substantial progress on means-tested fee assistance is possible.

7.2 Reforms to enhance independent-state school partnership

To reach a long-term vision for independent-state school partnership, we have considered a series of incremental steps.

A sector-wide reporting standard for partnerships will be fundamental, as discussed already in this chapter. This could be done through **making the Schools Partnership Alliance style, or a revised version of it, the required template in all *Schools Together* contributions from schools**. This would rapidly converge the reporting of partnerships at a limited cost and would solve any collective action problem.

This would in turn provide fertile ground **for DfE regional directors to provide a level of coordination of partnership activity and to join up educational schemes between the sectors**. Clearer reporting and defining of partnership opportunities would allow DfE regional directors to launch regional databases of available and desired partnerships that all schools in each region can access to enhance partnership ‘matching’.

Partnership opportunities could be published by schools, according to this defined reporting standard, and schools seeking partnership would then be able to log onto the database when they are pursuing a partnership and easily locate an appropriate arrangement. It could also expand the geographical scope of partnership. These could be anything from an educational extension that they want to explore or a partnership opportunity they want to offer. This would significantly ease barriers to entry in partnerships and minimise administrative overheads through a simple system. This system could also provide a way for organised DfE collecting of partnership incidence data.

Moving incrementally forward from this step, there are two key opportunities that this additional joining up could facilitate. For these larger, structural opportunities, cross-sector organisations such as the Chartered College of Teaching, Association of School and College Leaders and National Governance Association will be fundamentally important as they set the precedent for organisations running across the independent and state school sectors.

The first is in cross-sector governance. Where independent and state schools are in local proximity to one another, a long-term vision could be to maximise how many local schools have representatives of one another on their governing boards. There is already a significant amount of this board representation in the independent sector,²⁸⁶ but it could be embedded further, especially mutually in terms of independent schools inviting state school teachers to be governors. The second is in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) schemes. Placements visits and continuing professional development (CPD) within ITT schemes could utilise the independent sector much more than they currently do. The above would significantly lay the ground work for this shared teacher training.

²⁸⁶ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024) p23.

Chapter 8.

Schools as community hubs meeting social need

Creativity, and independence of activity and thought is at the core of independent schooling. The sector is also one that seeks to collaborate. This results in a socially entrepreneurial sector, looking to areas of need at a community level and evaluating how independent schools can contribute to British society. There are a number of exciting avenues explored here, taken from evidence the Commission has collected (though not all are appropriate for all independent schools).

The first part of this chapter looks at how to understand schools as ‘community hubs’ and what this might look like. It then discusses a number of possible avenues of exploration before the final part discusses possible long-term reform for a wider and more holistic understanding of partnership.

Recommendations for schools as community hubs meeting social need

- **Define a school ‘community hub’:** A broader understanding of independent schools partnering with local communities can be defined through an understanding of ‘community hubs’. Community hub schools host activities that enhance their local community.
- **Explore opportunities for ‘anchoring hubs’:** Independent schools form anchoring hubs when partnering with local and civic organisations that are not schools – such as healthcare, education and other social services – to join up and coordinate different services in areas in order to be able to respond more holistically to complex needs.
- **Explore opportunity for ‘innovation hubs’:** Independent schools form innovation hubs when a major element of what or how they operate is clearly distinctive from the norm, and the result is a innovative schooling offered.
- **Long-term reform: Coordinating innovation through one overarching ISC innovation hub:** Existing ISC associations could work together and bring their respective innovation and improvement groups under one banner for the benefit of economies of scale and clearer advocacy for the sector as a whole.

8.1 What is a 'community hub'? Anchoring and innovation hubs

Schools as 'community hubs' is a reasonably common term but one that does not have a clear definition. It tends to relate to two concepts. The first is 'community anchors', similar to that which is described in the Confederation of School Trust's report *Community anchors: School trusts as Anchor Institutions*.²⁸⁷

The basic idea of an anchor educational institution is a typically charitable educational institution with a close tie to its geographic area that engages in community work. It is worth noting that anchor institutions often receive public resources, something that independent schools generally do not.

The specific activities of anchor institutions tend to be quite similar to that of independent-state school partnerships but with local and civic organisations that are not schools: healthcare, education and other social services. The purpose tends to be to join up and coordinate different services in areas in order to be able to respond more holistically to complex needs.

The other concept that schools as 'community hubs' draws from is the notion of an innovative school. An innovative school is not a closely defined or understood term but it tends to mean schools where a major element of what or how they operate is clearly distinctive from the norm, and that the result is a novel schooling offered.

Innovation is most commonly mediated through which resources are used (for example, an impetus on the outdoors as an educational resource or a prioritisation of learning through technology); the curriculum content (for example the introduction of the EPQ, extensions of co-curricular offering or schools writing their own curriculum in general); and the educational philosophy (generally, this does not mean new philosophies but creative and different implementations of them). It is difficult to closely define and it can be hard to distinguish between innovative and generally unorthodox practice.

Schools as community hubs tends to be a synthesis of both of these traditions: schools which look beyond their orthodox operations and towards their locality to provide wider social benefit to their pupils and local area and to do so in a way that is educationally innovative.

²⁸⁷ Townsend, J. et al (2022) *Community Anchoring – School Trusts as Anchor Institutions*. Available at: <https://cstuk.org.uk/knowledge/thought-leadership/community-anchoring-school-trusts-as-anchor-institutions/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024)

8.2 Long-term reform

Independent schools innovation hub

In the long-term, innovative practice from independent schools acting as community hubs can look to be strategically coordinated through an independent schools innovation hub, that allows schools to maintain their autonomy whilst benefiting from the returns to scale of resource and expertise sharing.

The introduction of a body to coordinate is worth exploring. Many schools have started innovation centres or hubs or appointed innovation leads in the last few years, but the work is fragmented and does not benefit from economies of scale. This presents an exciting opportunity.

The independent sector's constant innovative work is already partially facilitated through various innovation working groups. However, there is an opportunity for economies of scale in the introduction of one overarching innovation hub, or improvement hub.

This would be able to incorporate both strands of independent schools as community hubs, as it could also provide a mechanism through which independent schools developed a sector wide understanding as to the best ways independent schools can tie themselves to different geographical areas and social contexts.

Considering that the independent sector's ability to innovate is one of the key ways it understands its benefit to society, it seems sensible that it should be a key function of independent schools associating with one another. Whether existing associations could work together on this and bring their respective innovation and improvement groups under one banner is an avenue worth exploring for the sector. This would allow administrative economies of scale and better clarity and coherence of advocacy as well as streamlined replication of best practice.

This slightly different approach to an independent school association could suggest a wider review from the sector of the structure of independent school associations based on efficiency, clarity and economies of scale.

An opportunity for the existing innovative work that goes on in the independent sector is for it to be partially or wholly merged into an overarching improvement group to allow it economies of scale and to facilitate better coordination, communication and implementation of ideas.

8.3 Medium-term opportunities

There is no one answer for how independent schools could best utilise the opportunities to act as community hubs, but there are a number of timely medium-term opportunities that the sector can explore, across both traditions. The examples highlighted are not intended to be exhaustive, and other exciting community hub options are available, such as partnership with local libraries. The examples focus on those that are particularly politically pertinent at the current time.

'Anchoring' community hubs

Nursery provision

Formal childcare is expanding. The current Education Secretary's stated desire is for formal provision for children from the end of maternity leave.²⁸⁸ This is an operationally difficult challenge for any government and presents an opportunity for creative thinking on the part of independent schools for social entrepreneurship. To help society in a way that works for everyone.

The new Labour government's 2024 manifesto promised 100,000 new childcare places and more than 3,000 new nurseries as part of its childcare plan.²⁸⁹ This is partly due to a well reported strain on the supply of childcare places in recent years, where the proportion of local authorities that said that they had sufficient childcare provision for children under two in 2024 was 29 per cent, down from 42 per cent in 2023.²⁹⁰ Part of this problem, as has been highlighted in previous Civitas research, is that the supply of high-quality – or desired – nursery places is much more acute.²⁹¹

It is partly also to ensure that supply meets expected increased demand with the expansion of free childcare to working parents that is expected to be introduced. The number of full-day nursery places booked in school-based providers increased by 20 per cent between 2022 and 2023, whilst the number of places only increased by seven per cent.²⁹² This can be reasonably expected to accelerate as government support expands significantly – especially for full-time places – in the next five years.

Adjacent to this, 792 ISC schools have a nursery provision, with over 29,000 nursery students in 2024, a number that has slowly grown over the last decade.²⁹³ Also, ISC school primary school numbers have performed worse than secondary school numbers in the last five years,

²⁸⁸ Blond, D. (2022) 'Childcare will be completely reimagined if we win power', vows Labour's shadow education secretary', *The Standard*, 22 September. Available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/labour-party-conference-childcare-reforms-bridget-phillipson-b1027305.html?fbclid=IwAR1Dsw1nSwn-YGgQfevaz2luwpcguYRBYPxTJzS-1SPz0EvdwTSfd6xroqI> (Accessed: 11 December 2024).

²⁸⁹ Labour Party (2024) *Labour Party Manifesto*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

²⁹⁰ Clarke, V. and Thomson, C. (2024) *Childcare shortage worsens as costs rise – report*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-68580918> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

²⁹¹ Pasternack, E. and Cook, G. (2024) *Back to basics: what is childcare policy for?: Towards a childcare system based on choice*, Available at: <https://civitas.org.uk/publications/back-to-basics-what-is-childcare-policy-for/> (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

²⁹² UK Government (2023) *Childcare and early years provider survey*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

²⁹³ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

with the number of primary school pupils falling 1.5 per cent from 2019 to 2024 whilst the number of secondary school pupils has risen 6.9 per cent.²⁹⁴ This challenge is expected to continue for both demographic and affordability reasons, as highlighted in the consultation.

Together, these developments suggest that a possibly mutually beneficial complement to the government's current approach could be to offer grants to existing independent schools to begin to offer nursery provision or to significantly expand existing provision.

For the government, this could be an effective, relatively hands-free way to increase the supply of high-quality childcare from institutions that are already trusted by local parents and have a proven track record in education and pastoral care. From the perspective of independent schools, this could be an opportunity to diversify and improve the pipeline into their schools whilst simultaneously aiding the greater needs of society.

Aiming to increase the number of national nursery places presents an opportunity where independent schools can work collaboratively with government in a way that retains independence and is mutually beneficial.

Family Hubs and Young Futures programme

The need for hubs of community and expert guidance in a society with complex social needs is increasingly being stressed by politicians of all persuasions, and the demand on schools to provide additional support in a society with many fragmented families is clear.²⁹⁵

The new Labour government's manifesto has promised:

*'...a new Young Futures programme with a network of hubs reaching every community. These hubs will have youth workers, mental health support workers, and careers advisers on hand to support young people's mental health and avoid them being drawn into crime.'*²⁹⁶

The manifesto also referred to this community work as 'local prevention partnerships'.²⁹⁷

Many independent schools have the physical buildings and ethos to pursue this societal challenge as an opportunity for social entrepreneurship. Indeed, the Family Hubs Network – which is extremely similar to the suggested Young Futures programme – already includes school-based family hubs,²⁹⁸ and gives some leading examples of this. Partnership with Family Hubs allow independent schools to provide 'cradle to career'²⁹⁹ support from

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Centre for Social Justice (2024), *Lonely Nation: Part 1: How family can help to end the loneliness crisis*, Available at: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CSJ-Lonely_Nation.pdf (Accessed 2 July 2024)

²⁹⁶ Labour Party (2024) *Labour Party Manifesto*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024) p66.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ The Family Hubs Network. *School-based Hubs*. Available at: <https://familyhubnetwork.com/hubs/types-of-family-hubs/hubs-in-schools/> (Accessed: 2 July 2024).

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

maternity to post-school for parents and children, especially families that have experienced breakdown.

Community partnership work on a ‘Young Futures programme’ or through Family Hubs presents another opportunity where independent schools can engage in broader partnership work with government provision for young people in a way that is mutually beneficial.

Neighbourhood health centres

The urgent search for increased physical capacity for consultations and out-of-hospital appointments on evenings and weekends in the healthcare system to drive down high waiting lists has been articulated by the new government on a number of occasions. Getting waiting lists down was an important debate in the 2024 General Election and was the second of the new Labour government’s six first steps for change.³⁰⁰

Two of the ways that the Labour Party manifesto suggested doing this were out-of-hospital neighbourhood health centres and a Community Pharmacist Prescribing Service.³⁰¹ The neighbourhood health centres in part are looking to find physical capacity in local communities for people to get face-to-face GP appointments on evenings and weekends at locations convenient for them. A number of independent schools have appropriate facilities for this that are often out of use in evenings and weekends.

The manifesto also suggested the introduction of pharmaceutical prescribing rights, something that the new government has pledged to introduce ‘where clinically appropriate’.³⁰² Independent schools could also explore offering their buildings and resources for onsite out-of-hours pharmaceutical services, and partner with local health services in this provision.

Within a vision of independent schools as community hubs that use their resources to meet social need, there is an opportunity to work with government in community out-of-hospital healthcare provision.

‘Innovative’ community hubs

Technology and cutting overhead costs

Of course, the opportunities and challenges presented by new technologies are nearly endless. The capacity for technology to reduce overhead costs and teacher workloads is much needed. Independent schools are uniquely placed to innovate here, and to utilise their independence in doing so.

Independent schools have already been highly proactive in looking to capitalise on the educational opportunities of technology. One particular avenue of technology utilisation

³⁰⁰ Labour Party (2024) *Labour Party Manifesto*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024) page 10.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, page 99.

³⁰² *Ibid*.

that could provide school system-wide benefit would be to reduce the overhead costs of running a school and reduce teacher workload through technology and artificial intelligence (AI). Caterham School is one example of this.³⁰³

Innovation in using AI to cut overhead costs is an excellent example of where independent school initiative can drive standards across the school system if it can produce replicable cost savings.

Online schooling

Another exciting avenue through which independent schools can utilise technology, and one where they can also look to partner with state schools, is to explore the capability of online schooling in the independent sector. There are already examples of online innovation, and the future could include schools offering educational websites/apps that are available to their students as included in the fee, but available to all via a separate subscription.

One excellent example is Lumina, which offers free online tutoring and mentorship to looked-after children. Lumina already has 19 participating schools and over 100 students.³⁰⁴ This is a brilliant example of the aforementioned possibility for independent schools to take the lead in transforming the lives of the most disadvantaged children in our society.

The vision of the independent schools sector forming the centrepiece of the government's target to double the proportion of care leavers progressing into university will depend on the success of Lumina as well as RNCSE. Sector coordination around this specific avenue would be tremendously promising.

Another, different, example of the opportunities of online schooling is where independent schools can spread their cultural and curricular breadth across the school system. The online learning platform EtonX presents an exceptional opportunity for independent schools to share the fruit of the broadest elements of their educational offering such as critical thinking, communication and writing skills, and university support.³⁰⁵ If EtonX was made free for independent schools, then it could, over the long-term and with knowledge sharing, form the main online resource platform for independent sector partnership in these areas.

A third exciting example of the educational potential of online schooling is in providing education for those children that are unable to attend school because of bullying, abuse, mental health problems or other serious health conditions. Online schooling provides an opportunity to offer these children an education and an educational community that they otherwise might not have. One example of this is families charity Red Balloon, who provide a three-pronged programme of education, wellbeing and social re-engagement for children missing from education.³⁰⁶

³⁰³ Caterham School (2023) *Podcast - AI at Caterham Prep School – Video*. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/841262404> (Accessed: 3 July 2024).

³⁰⁴ Lumina. Available at: <https://lumina.org.uk/> (Accessed: 3 July 2024).

³⁰⁵ EtonX. Available at: <https://etonx.com/> (Accessed: 3 July 2024).

³⁰⁶ Red Balloon Learner Centres. Available at: <https://www.redballoonlearner.org/> (Accessed: 2 September 2024).

Online schooling presents an opportunity to enhance the reach and targeting of independent-independent and independent-state school partnership.

Chapter 9.

Specialist and mid-market independent schooling

Specialist and mid-market independent schooling has the potential to address accessibility of independent schools at the margin through affordability. Protecting specialist schooling can also nurture the sector's cultural breadth and independence of activity, thought, and creativity. Specialist schooling in terms of music, drama, and sport is extremely important to the sector's excellence and international acclaim.

Parents aspire to give their children the best schooling possible, and the Commission's polling suggests that almost half of parents that do not currently send their children to independent schools would do so if they could afford to.

Independent schools provide a more expensive schooling than state schools, which makes sense: it is not possible for them to be less expensive to parents who have already paid for state schooling through taxation, and parents who pay a fee for their children's schooling want that schooling to be better resourced than the state schooling that they could have had for free (at point of entry).

The result, however, is a gap in the schooling market. When asked, a large number of parents would optimally spend some money, but less than £13,000 a year, on improving their child's education, yet less than two per cent of children in England attend schools that charge fees above £0 and less than £12,000. The consequence of this is that almost half of households with children in the UK have household incomes between £55,000 and £76,000 per year, and yet our polling suggests that they make up fewer than 15 per cent of independent school households.

The expansion of an independent school 'mid-market', with annual fees under one and a half times state school per-pupil funding – around £12,000 – below which there are currently few places – would have a considerable impact on the sector's accessibility. The Commission's polling suggests that as many as a sixth of parents exist on the margin between independent schooling being affordable with sacrifices, and straightforwardly unaffordable.

This chapter looks at a long-term vision for mid-market independent schooling, with the help of a series of international examples from Denmark, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It discusses how these examples provide lessons to inform possible long-term reform for specialist and mid-market independent schooling in this country.

The chapter then evaluates a series of possible short- and medium-term reforms in the current context that the independent sector exists within, in order to improve this situation and move towards the long-term vision.

Recommendations for specialist and mid-market independent schooling

- ***A government commitment to a better understanding of the independent schools sector:*** *The Department for Education should know the charitable status and fees of every independent school, alongside existing data on religious character and size. This will allow an understanding of what mid-market exists.*
 - ***Independent schools sector to commission research into exploring the viability and circumstances of specialist and mid-market independent schools:*** *This research can critically examine whether the mid-market of independent schooling could present an opportunity to realise the aspiration for a more affordable independent education sector.*
 - ***Long-term reform: A new generation of specialist and mid-market independent schools:*** *Independent schools that are specialist – innovating or preserving cultural heritage and religious freedom – could receive partial state funding, alongside those that are mid-market, conditional on their accessibility. The maximum grant would be approximately £4,000 per pupil, half of the state school funding rate. It would be fee-indexed, being gradually removed for schools charging annual fees in excess of £4,000, with independent schools losing 50p of grant funding for each £1 fee increase between £4,000 and £12,000.*
-

9.1 Long-term reform: International examples

This chapter starts by looking at international examples to learn how long-term structural reforms could enhance specialist and mid-market independent schooling.

There is also some British precedent for schools that are partly funded by independent fees and partly by government, including direct-grant schools from 1945 to 1976 and – to some extent – voluntary schools from 1870 to 1945. These examples are helpful background context.

The examples are evaluated according to three measures. The first is to increase accessibility by generating a mid-market of affordable independent schooling. The second is to protect and quality control distinctive, specialist and innovative schools. The third, slightly less common, reason is that by expanding the independent sector you can increase the total investment in education in the country, increasing the aggregate schools budget.

Denmark

In 1992, Denmark introduced a school voucher-type system whereby independent schools can receive a grant based on the number of pupils they have enrolled. Notably, central funding is not organised according to per-pupil payments.

The voucher-type grant for independent schools is indexed to expenditures in state schools and varies with school size (smaller schools receive more per pupil) and the age distribution of teachers and students.

These payments only account for about 80 per cent of educational costs, and independent schools are therefore allowed to charge tuition (low-income households are permitted to apply for waivers) or seek external grants.

Importantly, per-pupil expenditures are typically lower in the independent schools sector, which accounts for around 22 per cent of pupils in Denmark, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).³⁰⁷ Fees are typically DKK 1,250 to DKK 2,500 a month (this translates to circa £1,700 to £3,500 a year, in August 2024), but around three per cent of all Danish schools charge fees in excess of the government grant.³⁰⁸

These schools retain their curricular and operational independence, not unlike English Free schools and Academies, but charge much lower fees due to the financial headroom awarded to them by their government funding. A lot of independent schools in Denmark are schools with a particular distinct educational philosophy or religion. There are also a number of smaller community schools that are not dissimilar to English independent primary schools. There are very few schools that resemble the large, grand, expensive English ‘public schools’.

³⁰⁷ Education GPS – OECD. *Denmark*. Available at:

<https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=DNK&treshold=10&topic=PI> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³⁰⁸ Ibid. Undervisnings Ministeriet. *Private Schools*. Available at: <https://eng.uvm.dk/-/media/filer/uvm-eng/pdf/fact-sheets/101221-private-schools.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

The reputational and quality benefit of these schools is therefore not seen, nor is their controversy.

This system allows far greater choice in education to parents: independent schools offer an education that is tangibly different to what is typical in the state sector and is affordable to a large cross-section of the society. In this sense, they are highly effective at aim one, increasing parental choice through accessibility.

According to the OECD, the performance gap between independent and state schools in Denmark is a little smaller than in the United Kingdom (which includes Academies as independent schools), but independent schools do still perform a little better than state schools. Positively, this provisionally suggests that the distinctive education that is protected in Denmark's independent school system is also a high-quality education, but that it does not come at the cost of state schooling.³⁰⁹

In addition to this, the gap in educational standard between the most advantaged quarter of pupils and the most disadvantaged quarter of pupils in Denmark is smaller than the OECD average, suggesting that this system has not induced a major socioeconomic stratification problem.³¹⁰

Canada

Canada's independent school sector educates an estimated 7.5 per cent of students in Canada.³¹¹ Across the 10 provinces in Canada, five have partial state funding for some independent schools. The categories of school vary significantly across the 10 different provinces and the extent of state funding varies from 35 per cent to 80 per cent of the state school level across and within each of the five provinces that have some funding for independent schools.³¹²

Research from the Canadian public policy think tank The Fraser Institute outlines the regulatory requirements for funded independent schools.³¹³ They split the regulatory requirements into establishment, operation and accountability. It is worthwhile considering their explanation.

The key establishment requirement for funded independent schools is around profit making. In two (British Columbia and Alberta) of the five provinces that offer independent school funding, funded independent schools must be established as non-profit bodies. In a third province Saskatchewan the non-profit requirement is mostly held, with one exception for

³⁰⁹ Education GPS – OECD. *Denmark*. Available at: <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=DNK&treshold=10&topic=PI> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Bush, O. (2024) *Education System Statistics in Canada*. Available at: <https://madeinca.ca/education-system-statistics-canada/> (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

³¹² Van Pelt, D. et al (2017) *The Funding and Regulation of Independent Schools in Canada*. Available at: <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/funding-and-regulation-of-independent-schools-in-canada.pdf> (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

³¹³ Ibid.

what are called ‘Historical high schools’. The final two of those five have some form of non-profit preference, albeit profitable funded independent schools are permitted.

Across the five provinces, there are a range of other smaller funded independent school establishment regulations, generally around satisfying some state school standards requirements.

All funded independent schools in Canada must use the provincial curriculum, must employ provincially certified teachers and must participate in provincial assessments.

This is a higher level of regulation than in England, where neither independent schools nor Academies or Free schools have to meet these requirements. It is also much more devolved than England, where teacher certification and the curriculum are defined at a national, not provincial or regional, level.

All funded independent schools in Canada must submit regular financial and enrolment reports, like in England. In Alberta, to achieve the higher ‘level 2 accredited’ level of funding, schools must submit annual three-year plans and detailed results reports.

Across all provinces, regulation is lighter for non-funded independent schools than for funded independent schools. However, this does not mean that there is less regulation for independent schools in provinces where none of them receive any funding.

No provinces require non-funded independent schools to be non-profit; a large majority of non-funded independent schools in Canada are not required to teach the provincial curriculum; eight of the 10 provinces in Canada do not require non-funded independent schools to employ provincially certified teachers; and seven of the 10 provinces in Canada do not require non-funded independent schools to participate in provincial assessments – although they tend to anyway.

In terms of accountability, some reporting is required from all non-funded independent schools, but it is generally less onerous than for funded independent schools. Most non-funded independent schools are inspected, although not all, and student records are inspected but not at the same level of detail as funded independent schools.

Australia

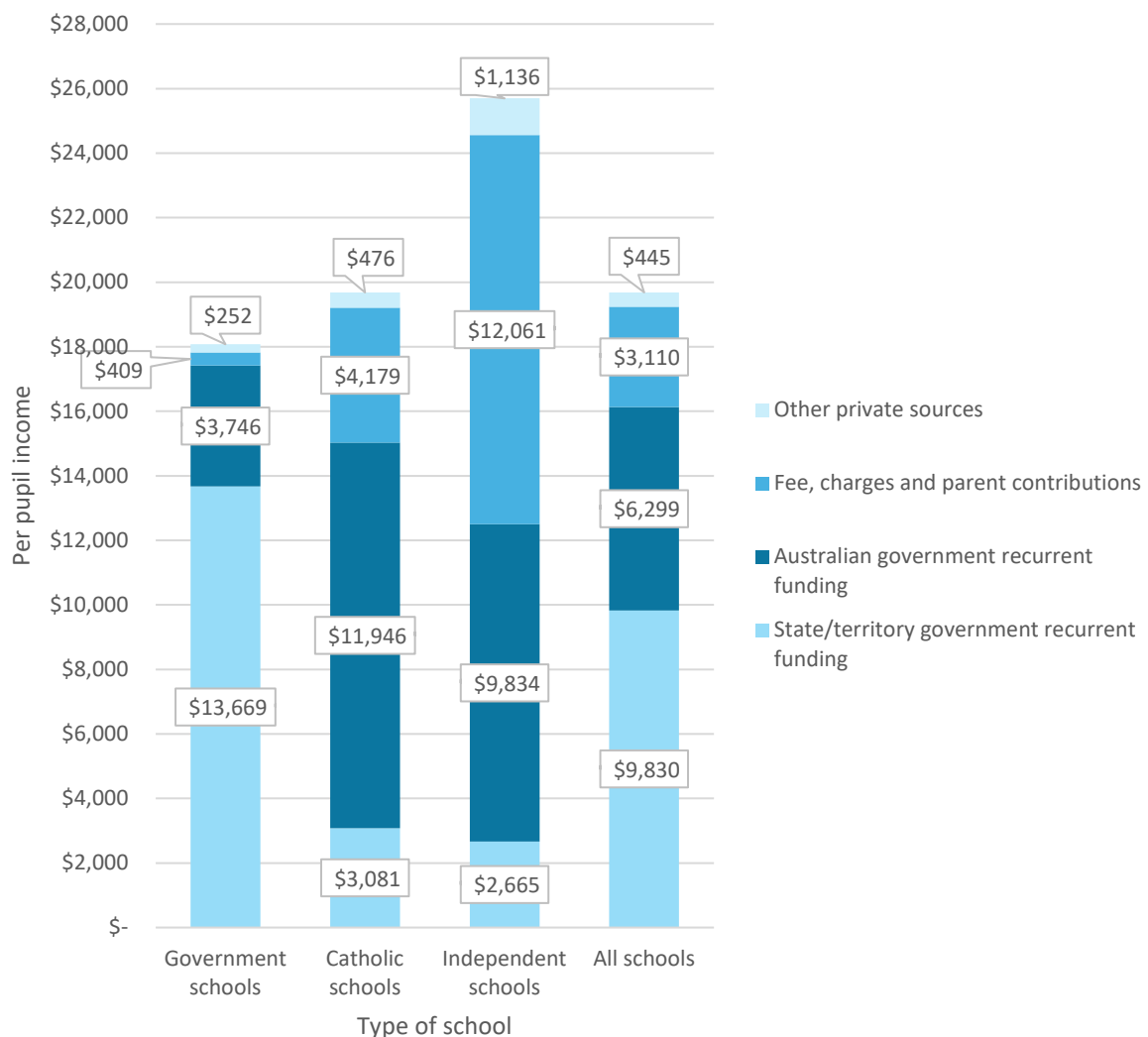
All schools in Australia are partly publicly funded, the extent of which varies significantly. Of all government funding for schools, 24 per cent goes to non-government schools.³¹⁴

There are three main types of school in Australia: government schools, Catholic schools and independent schools. Government data, presented in Figure 9.1, shows their respective income sources as a proportion of their total income.

³¹⁴ ACARA (2023) *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2022*. Available at: https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia_2022.pdf (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

Catholic schools receive around a quarter of their income from private sources, most of which is fees and other parent contributions, and they receive a total of nine per cent more per-pupil income than state schools receive. Independent schools receive around half of their income from private sources and receive a total of 42 per cent more per-pupil income than state schools receive. We also see that state schools receive 16 per cent more per-pupil public funding (from either Australian government or state/territory government) than Catholic schools and 39 per cent more per-pupil public funding than independent schools.³¹⁵

Figure 9.1: Gross recurrent school income, by funding source and school sector, 2022 (\$ per FTE student), Australia, 2022



Source: ACARA (2023) *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2022*. Available at: https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia_2022.pdf (Accessed: 4 July 2024). p136.

³¹⁵ ACARA (2023) *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2022*. Available at: https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia_2022.pdf (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

The government recurrent school funding of independent schools is set through the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding model, and has been since 2014.³¹⁶ This model is reasonably similar to the National Funding Formula (NFF) entitlement model in England, whereby per-pupil funding is set according to an estimate of how much total public funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs.

This SRS funding is split into a 'base' and 'loadings' funding.³¹⁷ All government schools receive a full 'base' funding, whereas non-government schools receive a partial 'base' funding. The amount that they receive is adjusted according to their 'capacity to contribute' (CTC), which is calculated by measuring the income of the families that use the schools. This is measured through a technology referred to as 'Direct Measure of Income' (DMI).³¹⁸

Essentially, the base funding of independent schools is a proportion of the whole base funding state schools receive, adjusted according to the affluence of the students who attend.

The 'loadings' are additional streams of government funding schools can get for students in disadvantaged cohorts and schools. This is similar to 'additional needs funding' in the English NFF entitlement system. The loadings are: school size, school location, low socio-educational advantage, students with disability, English language proficiency, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.³¹⁹

New Zealand

Since 1991, New Zealand has granted per-pupil funding to some independent schools. There are three overarching types of school in New Zealand:

- Public schools (hereon called state schools for simplicity) which account for the large majority of pupils;
- Independent schools which account for just under five per cent of pupils;
- Integrated schools which account for just over 10 per cent of pupils.

State schools are fully government funded; integrated schools are part government and part independently funded; independent schools receive no government funding.

For all schools that receive any government funding, the majority of funding is given at a per-pupil level, such that schools that attract more students receive more funding. However, state schools receive more funding than integrated schools do.

³¹⁶ Independent Schools Australia. *School Funding Model*. Available at: <https://isa.edu.au/our-sector/funding/school-funding-model/> (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

State integrated schools are schools with a ‘special character’, which generally means a particular religious faith, but can mean specialist education methods such as Steiner and Montessori schools.

They are permitted to charge compulsory fees known as ‘attendance dues’ and also receive government funding which is largely allocated per pupil (that is, entitlements). Fees are typically around NZ\$1,500 a year (circa £710 in August 2024).³²⁰ These schools tend to receive final income slightly less or roughly the same as state schools. This is indicative of the lack of ‘income-for-money’ concern for specialist schools and the increased focus on affordability, as in Chapter 4.2.

New Zealand independent schools typically charge around NZ\$20,000 a year (circa £9,500 in August 2024).

Arguably, the New Zealand system achieves the largest amount of choice for parents in education. There remains a thriving high-cost independent schools sector, as there is in England, and this sector’s freedoms are not infringed upon by state legislation. However, there is also a thriving and significant section of the schools system which offers distinctive, affordable and autonomous independent schooling.

This is further enhanced by the specialist nature of the state integrated schools, ensuring that they capture as wide as possible a proportion of the innovative and distinctive choices parents want available to them.

Interestingly, the OECD does not recognise state integrated schools in New Zealand as independent schools. The fully independent schools in New Zealand do perform very well, much better than state schools in New Zealand, although OECD evidence suggests that this is lost when controlling for wider socioeconomic factors.

What we can posit is that the New Zealand model does incentivise independent schools to be innovative and distinctive in their practices as this provides a mechanism to receive substantial government support.

³²⁰ Live & Work New Zealand. *The school system*. Available at: <https://www.live-work.immigration.govt.nz/live-in-new-zealand/education-and-schooling/the-school-system> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

9.2 Initial steps before reform: A better understanding

The reality of the English independent sector as it exists today seems a long way from these examples. Initially, work must be done both independently and by the government to understand more fully the reality of mid-market and specialist independent schooling; to understand what it looks like and under what conditions it is viable.

A better understanding

One of the big challenges with specialist and mid-market independent schooling is that it is not well understood.

Leading critical voices of the independent schools sector have often shown scepticism as to the incidence of specialist and mid-market independent schools – a view clear in, arguably, the leading piece calling to abolish the sector, *Engines of Privilege* by Kynaston and Green.³²¹ Private Education Policy Forum, the leading pro-abolition activist group, have also made one of their three key missions ‘To enhance public knowledge and discussion of these issues and propose ways forward which improve education policy.’³²²

Although assertions as to the underlying reality vary, there is a clear feeling shared by those supporting and opposing independent schooling that the detail of the sector is not sufficiently well understood publicly and by government.

There are two significant ways that this can be improved. The first is a government commitment to understanding and collecting a better range of information on the independent sector, improving the understanding of it. This is important to ensure that policymakers have a strong grasp of the existing knowledge base on the sector.

The second is an increase in the knowledge base itself. In particular, those schools which exists in the mid-market of schooling, charging more than state school per-pupil funding but significantly less than average ISC school fees, need to be understood and defined. Our consultation found a range of opinions on the quality of mid-market independent schools, united by a cloudiness as to the evidence around the nature and circumstances of these schools.

This presents an opportunity for the independent school sector to commission research into the market, and to answer the difficult questions about these schools.

British education’s ‘best kept secret’: State boarding schools

State boarding schools, of which there are 32, are the clearest example in the English education system of an offering that resembles both the state and independent sectors.³²³ Independent education has been defined in this report as having five characteristics:

³²¹ Kynaston, D. and Green, F. (2019) *Engines of Privilege: Britain's Private School Problem*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

³²² Private Education Policy Forum. *About*. Available at: <https://www.pepf.co.uk/about/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³²³ State Boarding Forum (2021) *Parents' Guide to State Boarding Schools*. Available at: <https://www.boarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SBF-Parents-Guide-November-2021.pdf> (Accessed: 11 December 2024).

independence in pupil selection, independence in recruitment (and teachers not requiring QTS), curricula independence, independent governance and financial independence.³²⁴

The first four of these are shared by all Free schools and Academies, which most state boarding schools are, but not financial independence. State boarding schools, however, charge fees – typically between £10,000 and £17,000 per year – to cover boarding costs.³²⁵ They are not fully financially independent as they still receive full state funding, but they do have a high degree of financial autonomy as they can set their own fees.

As well as inarguably being state schools, Academy/Free school state boarding schools arguably meet the criteria for being independent schools. This is an important precedent to be aware of: state-funded fee-charging schools do exist already in our education system.

A number of state boarding schools, including Haberdashers' Adams, Holyport College and the Wellington Academy, were set up recently by large boarding schools, and work in an integrated partnership with them.³²⁶ This is a highly promising model, especially considering the exceptional standard of these state boarding schools,³²⁷ and provides an example of how blurring the bridge between state and independent schools can substantially improve the accessibility of distinctive and exceptional education.

³²⁴ See page viii

³²⁵ State Boarding Forum (2021) *Parents' Guide to State Boarding Schools*. Available at: <https://www.boarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SBF-Parents-Guide-November-2021.pdf> (Accessed: 11 December 2024).

³²⁶ State Boarding Forum (2021) *Parents' Guide to State Boarding Schools*. Available at: <https://www.boarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SBF-Parents-Guide-November-2021.pdf> (Accessed: 11 December 2024).

³²⁷ State Boarding Forum (2021) *Parents' Guide to State Boarding Schools*. Available at: <https://www.boarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SBF-Parents-Guide-November-2021.pdf> (Accessed: 11 December 2024).

9.3 Opportunity for long-term reform

The conclusion of this research from government and the independent sector into the feasibility of an independent schools mid-market could lay the foundation for ambitious thinking as to long-term reform to expand such a provision.

The four different international models for central funding of independent schools outlined in Chapter 9.1 provide significant insight as to how such a system would potentially work in England.

One note that is often made is that the attainment and resource gap between state and independent school sectors is generally lower in countries where some independent schools are centrally funded. There are several reasons for this. The basic explanation is that once independent schools become accessible to less affluent parents, demand becomes much more price elastic and as such they become much more price competitive.

Another reason is the aforementioned ‘income-for-money’ effect: if an independent school receives half of the central funding of a state school (say £4,000 per pupil per year), then at fees of £8,000, their school has a total income of £12,000 per pupil per year. This means that they get an income-for-money of 50 per cent – £8,000 spent, £4,000 more for their child. To get income-for-money of 50 per cent with no central funding, fees must reach £16,000 – £16,000 spent, £8,000 more for their child.

It would be important that this grant stimulates mid-market independent schooling, as in line with the aim of increasing accessibility, and that it does not induce undue socioeconomic stratification. We would not want a situation where central funding further embedded the gap between independent and state schools – to avoid this, the grant must go to schools with lower income than average independent schools and be targeted towards those with less affluent cohorts. The grant would also potentially need to be regionally adjusted.

How to organise the grant

The examples from other countries organise the grant in four different ways. In Canada, the grant comes with the expectation of a closer relationship with the state. Independent schools lose many of their freedoms – curricular autonomy, freedom to take profit (mostly), freedom over teacher recruitment and greater reporting regulation – if they want central funding. For independent schools whose priority is to operate in the more affordable part of the market, some of this could be attractive, whereby they mostly run as fee-charging state schools that receive slightly less central funding. In Denmark, all independent schools receive largely unconditional central funding, but they are far less expensive than English independent schools.

In Australia, all independent schools receive funding according to capacity to contribute (CTC), essentially meaning that their central funding is tied to the affluence of their students. As they educate more advantaged students, they lose central funding. For independent

schools whose focus is being low-cost, and for independent schools whose focus is pedagogical distinctiveness (not unlike Catholic schools in Australia) this could be an attractive option, where schools looking to be more accessible are financially rewarded for being more accessible.

In New Zealand, independent schools only qualify for state funding if they are specialist schools. This is certainly an interesting option in terms of direct protecting and nurturing distinctiveness.

England could take lessons from all of these frameworks. It seems clear that some distinction between the aim of increasing accessibility and nurturing distinctiveness would be useful, without overcomplicating the system. This way, each aim can be directly targeted: if socioeconomic accessibility is to be a principal aim, then the mechanism through which it is to be achieved should specifically target it, as in Australia; and if distinctiveness is to be a principal aim, then the funding can require it, as in New Zealand.

It is also important that this policy crowds in private investment from parents, with an increase in independent school places over the long-term as a result of the grant.

It is possible that two separate definitions of funding would be most appropriate: a mid-market independent school grant and a specialist independent school grant. For simplicity, the two should be as similar as possible.

Which independent schools and how much funding?

Mid-market independent schools

This raises the question of the eligibility of independent schools. Mid-market independent schools can logically be defined according to which part of the market they cater to, or – isolating accessibility – the affluence of their intake. Here, something like the SRS model used in Australia seems logical. On the other hand, there is a significant risk of a funding ‘cliff-edge’ for independent schools if only some mid-market independent schools are to be eligible, whereby at some level an increase in fees leads to a fall in income.

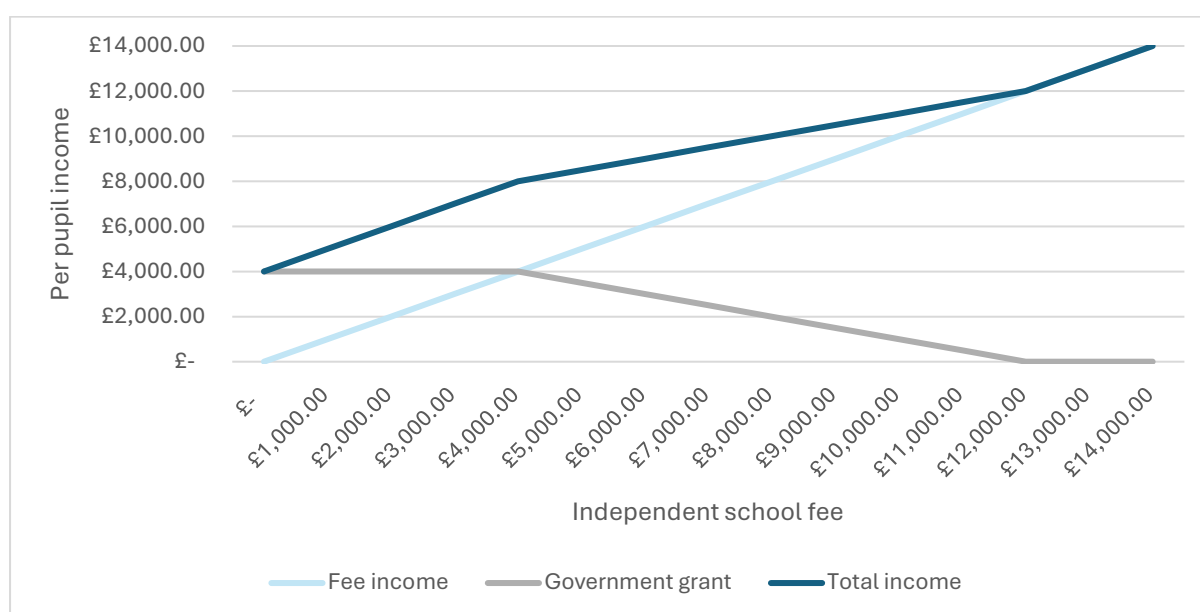
In this case, some sort of fee-indexing may be more appropriate, whereby the maximum grant that independent schools receive falls as their fees increase. Here, the grant could begin at 50 per cent of state school funding and decrease by one per cent for every two per cent increase in fees above 50 per cent of state school funding. This has been described in Table 9.1 below and shown graphically in Figure 9.2 assuming state school per-pupil funding of £8,000.

Table 9.1: Proposed mid-market or specialist maximum grant by fee level

Fees (% state school funding)	Grant (% state school funding)	Total Funding (% state school funding)
£2,000 (25.0%)	£4,000 (50.0%)	£6,000 (75.0%)
£4,000 (50.0%)	£4,000 (50.0%)	£8,000 (100.0%)
£6,000 (75.0%)	£3,000 (37.5%)	£9,000 (112.5%)
£8,000 (100.0%)	£2,000 (25.0%)	£10,000 (125.0%)
£10,000 (125.0%)	£1,000 (12.5%)	£11,000 (137.5%)
£12,000 (150.0%)	£0 (0.0%)	£12,000 (150.0%)

Source: Civitas analysis.

Figure 9.2: Proposed mid-market or specialist maximum grant by fee level



Source: Civitas analysis.

For this to be realistic, the independent school grant would also need to be an option for new independent schools, as well as existing independent schools.

The numbers outlined in the table could be the maximum grant, which would then be discounted according to a type of ‘capacity to contribute’ measure for the parents. This additional measure would minimise the risk of socioeconomic stratification – where more money goes to more affluent students.

It does not seem reasonable that these mid-market independent schools should be expected to employ qualified teachers or follow the national curriculum, considering that Academies are not required to do this. However, some sort of additional inspection requirement would be reasonable, and perhaps a charitable status requirement as well.

Specialist independent schools

Moving to the question of how specialist schools are defined and treated, a different second criteria could be given instead of the 'capacity to contribute' measure. Instead, specialist schools would have to prove distinctiveness, as an additional regulatory requirement, in order to be eligible for the same fee-indexed grant as above.

The fee cap at £12,000 – or 150 per cent of state school funding – for eligibility for the grant, combined with the mid-market option, should ensure a self-selectivity from specialist independent schools, where the treatment that they receive from government is 'incentive compatible' – it is only an attractive grant for specialist schools. Schools charging above £12,000 would have no way of increasing their income through the grant, and non-specialist schools charging under £12,000 can receive the grant (discounted according to the affluence of their cohort) so would not seek to claim 'specialist' unless they were.

As in New Zealand, specialist can be defined according to religion and educational philosophy, including an appreciation of innovation and cultural heritage. It could also include educational specialisms, such as music, drama, and sport.

Quality control

Of course, the other eligibility criterion which is extremely important is quality control. One of the key observations from parts 1 and 2 of the Commission indicates that there seems to be a non-association independent school quality problem, as indicated by Ofsted inspection outcomes. This is particularly true for religious non-association independent schools.

An obvious way that this policy could address the problem within its design is to require a 'Good' Ofsted inspection or better before schools are grant eligible – or whatever is broadly equivalent when Ofsted reform. For those in the ISC, they would need to meet the ISI equivalent. This will also provide an important financial incentive to these schools to perform well at inspection, as currently consultation evidence suggests that many of these schools are simply not that concerned with their Ofsted inspection results currently, as it does not significantly influence their demand.

Chapter 10.

Levelling the playing field for the most disadvantaged

Independent education has the potential to transform the lives of children from underprivileged backgrounds. The tailored nature of how these schools operate – small classes, individual attention, and extra SEND support – makes independent schools particularly able to cater for the most disadvantaged in society. By aspiring to set the gold standard in this area, the sector can enhance its existing international acclaim and excellence.

The first section in this chapter looks at domestic and international examples to learn from in terms of long-term reform on transforming disadvantage through independent schooling.

The next section looks at short- and medium-term options for positive change in this area. This relates to pupil premium eligibility and embedding independent school provision for looked-after children into a government strategy for increasing care leaver progression into university.

The final section then discusses implementation questions for the long-term reform of extending the NFF entitlement to include independent schools for the most disadvantaged children.

Recommendations for levelling the playing field for the most disadvantaged

- **Government strategy to improve care leaver university progression:** *Independent schools, in particular through Lumina and RNCSE, should form an explicit part of the government's much-needed and promised strategy to improve care leaver progression into university.*
 - **Pupil premium independent school eligibility:** *Pupil premium, where disadvantaged pupils are entitled to additional state funding for their schooling, paid to state schools, should be made eligible on a trial basis to disadvantaged children attending independent schools, conditional on increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children at independent schools.*
 - **Pupil premium VAT exemption:** *If, over the course of the initial trial period, this is shown to be successful in increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children at independent schools, then it should be expanded such that independent school fees of disadvantaged children are VAT exempt as well.*
 - **Independent schools bursary charity:** *The independent sector could launch a new bursary charity that would take annual contributions from independent schools in order to work together as a sector to increase the number of disadvantaged children at independent schools.*
 - **Long-term reform: Extend the state National Funding Formula entitlement for the most disadvantaged children so that it includes independent schools:** *The two incremental pupil premium policies, if successful, would lay the foundations for structural reform of the educational opportunity of disadvantaged children. This could be done by extending their NFF entitlement, paid to schools, to include independent schools. Top-up fees would be prohibited such that this would mean that independent schools would have to charge complete bursaries to qualify for the disadvantaged pupil's entitlements.*
-

10.1 Long-term reform: International and domestic examples

Considering the vision for the independent sector's ability to transform the lives of disadvantaged children in this country, this chapter first looks at historic and international examples of government part funding independent school places for disadvantaged children, to evaluate the historical and international precedent in this area.

Subsidised access schemes often have a range of different purposes, and the optimal design changes with these purposes. We propose four measures of evaluating subsidised access within the context of the Commission.

The first and most important measure is (1) improving the educational prospects of the most disadvantaged children through the use of independent schools. This takes both the ideas of addressing socioeconomic stratification and of increasing access together.

The other three measures are the effects of such a programme on (2) the efficiency of the school system, (3) the independent to state school funding gap and (4) public finances.

The primary question is one of improving the prospects of disadvantaged children. The following section evaluates the design questions.

The examples given allow discussion of design questions for a possible subsidised access scheme if it were to be introduced in England.

The Assisted Places Scheme

The Assisted Places Scheme was a major schools policy introduced in the 1980 Education Act by the first Thatcher Government (1979-1983). The basic premise of the scheme was that participating independent schools would remit school fees for selected low-income pupils such that they could attend independent schools, and the government would reimburse the schools for these fees that were remitted.

The Assisted Places Scheme was only for secondary school students.³²⁸ The main eligibility restriction, however, was household income. Eligibility was also constrained by academic selection.

On its introduction, families with a relevant income of £4,766 or less (circa £20,000 or less in 2024 prices)³²⁹ would pay nothing, and then those with a relevant income between £4,766 and £11,000 (circa £45,500 in 2024 prices) would pay somewhere between £0 and £1,500 (circa £6,200 in 2024 prices) corresponding to their income, with a progressive scale.³³⁰ Those with a family income above £11,000 (circa £45,500 in 2024 prices) were ineligible. These thresholds increased over the years.

³²⁸ UK Government (1980) *The Education (Assisted Places) Regulations 1980*. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1980/1743/pdfs/ukxi_19801743_en.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³²⁹ Bank of England. *Inflation calculator*. Available at: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³⁰ UK Parliament (1980) *Independent Schools (Assisted Places) HC Deb 29 October 1980 vol 991 cc625-59*. Available at: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1980/oct/29/independent-schools-assisted-places> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

The Assisted Places Scheme was often viewed as a partisan initiative, certainly by its end, and was swiftly abolished in 1997 with the start of the New Labour administration.

There is strong evidence that those students who used the Assisted Places Scheme significantly benefited from it, as most clearly shown by the Sutton Trust report *Lasting Benefits*:

'This, and earlier research, shows that most Assisted Place holders gained good school-level qualifications that gave them access to leading universities. This study shows that they have continued their upward trajectory in professional and managerial occupations and are now in relatively secure and satisfying occupations with high levels of earnings. From this perspective, the Scheme is an unqualified success and arguably reveals meritocracy at work.' – Power, S. et al, *Lasting Benefits* (2013).³³¹

Indeed, very few, even critics of the scheme, would suggest that the scheme's direct function – to subsidise an excellent education to the pupils on the scheme and to improve their life chances as a result – was unsuccessful.

That said, the scheme was deemed controversial by some for its entire existence and remains largely unpopular today.

There are two main reasons for this perception. The first is that the students who used the Assisted Places Scheme were mostly from middle class backgrounds, and that it did very little to help the poorest pupils.³³² In this sense, considering the key aim (1), the scheme did improve educational prospects, but not principally of the most disadvantaged, failing to entirely achieve the aim of improving the educational prospects of the most disadvantaged children.

The second is that it was cost ineffective, that as independent school places are more expensive, it was an unduly costly policy by the government for the benefit attained. This is cause for concern on aim 4, the impact on public finances. A third, less common, but still important, reason highlighted by some is that the Assisted Places Scheme crowded out independent school's own bursary programmes, and that there was a possible 'brain drain' effect on local state schools of able students.³³³ This raises cause for concern according to the aim (3) of improving the efficiency of the school system.

These strengths and weaknesses – in particular difficulties in targeting disadvantage – suggest a few important design errors in an otherwise effective Assisted Places Scheme. The

³³¹ Power, S. et al (2013) *Lasting Benefits: The Long-term Legacy of the Assisted Places Scheme for Assisted Place Holders*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/ASSISTEDPLACESREPORT0310.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³² Boseley, S. (2020) 'Assisted places scheme helps few working class pupils – archive, 1985', *The Guardian*, 2 December. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/dec/02/assisted-places-scheme-helps-few-working-class-pupils-archive-1985> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³³ Whitty, G. et al (1998) 'The assisted places scheme: its impact and its role in privatization and marketization', *Journal of Education Policy*, 13(2), pp.237–250. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0268093980130205> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

state should not be subsidising more than the cost of a state school place, and there are important questions around eligibility requirements and selectivity of the scheme. Including primary schools, tightening income eligibility and reevaluating academic selectivity could all potentially alleviate the problems of this scheme whilst retaining its strengths.

There are other subsidised access programmes internationally that are worthy of comparison, particularly in the United States.

State subsidised voucher system: The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

There are a large number of voucher schemes across the United States – with more than 20 states starting or expanding voucher-type programmes from 2020-2022.³³⁴ However, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was the model that many of these replicated, and merits particular attention.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was introduced in 1990 in the Milwaukee school district, targeting K-12 (Years 1-13) students whose household income was less than 175 per cent of the federal poverty level. Since 1998, it has included religious schools. The voucher pays whichever is less of fees at the independent school or the standard district state school allocation.³³⁵

School participation

Generally, schools are not permitted to charge additional fees, however for grades 9-12 (Years 10 to 13 in England) the school may charge additional fees (often known as ‘top-up’ fees) if and only if the family’s income exceeds 220 per cent of the federal poverty level. For a four-person family this would mean an income exceeding \$68,640 (circa £54,000 in August 2024). This permission for charging some fees was introduced in 2011.³³⁶ This means there are three tiers to the programme: those eligible without top-up fees, those eligible with them and those ineligible.

Transportation is provided by the district for children on the voucher scheme if they live within a set attendance (catchment) area.

Independent schools that participate in the programme set the number of slots available for voucher students and must accept all students, choosing via a lottery if they are oversubscribed. Academic selectivity, and most geographic selectivity within Milwaukee (they have to reside in Milwaukee, as the policy is of course restricted by the district jurisdiction) is not permitted. Catchment areas, as we would understand them in England, are not permitted, but a de facto catchment tends to exist due to transportation provision limitations.

³³⁴ Shah, N. (2022) ‘US school voucher programs have caught on – but are they funneling public dollars in private schools?’, *The Guardian*, 7 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/sep/07/us-school-vouchers-covid-private-schools-parents-new-hampshire> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³⁵ School Choice Wisconsin. *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*. Available at: <https://schoolchoicewi.org/programs/milwaukee-parental-choice-program/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

In order to participate in the programme, independent schools must meet at least one of four standards for eligibility around school quality.

Pupil participation

Although when it was set up in 1990, the voucher system was only open for families with household income not exceeding 175 per cent of the federal poverty line, this has been gradually relaxed.

The income threshold for eligibility depends on family size and marital status of parent(s). It is lowest for single parents with one child, at \$59,160 (circa £46,500 in August 2024), and increases according to family size and income. For families of four, the threshold is \$90,000 for a single parent (circa £70,500 in August 2024) and \$97,000 for married parents (circa £76,000 in August 2024).³³⁷

Importantly, once a pupil is in the programme, if their family's circumstances improve, they are not removed from the programme. This avoids the risk of adverse incentives whereby families do not aspire to improved socioeconomic circumstances because of the risk of a welfare 'cliff-edge'.

Although Milwaukee is more affluent than England, these are still high thresholds, and a large proportion of families are eligible.

Enrolment

Enrolment has grown steadily over the course of the programme, although has been much slower in the last few years; it reached 25,000 students in 2013-14 and has slowly grown to around 29,000 students in 2022-23.

These 29,000 students are split over 129 independent schools, at an average of 225 students per school.³³⁸

State subsidised Education Savings Accounts: Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Accounts

The first large-scale introduction of Education Savings Accounts was in Arizona with the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, launched in 2011.³³⁹

This programme allows parents to opt out of state schools and receive a portion of their public per-pupil funding deposited into a savings account. The money in this savings account can be used for a defined list of purposes including school fees, online education and private tutoring.

³³⁷ School Choice Wisconsin. *Income Eligibility Charts*. Available at: <https://schoolchoicewi.org/income-eligibility-charts/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³⁸ School Choice Wisconsin. *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*. Available at: <https://schoolchoicewi.org/programs/milwaukee-parental-choice-program/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³³⁹ EdChoice. *Empowerment Scholarship Accounts*. Available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/arizona-empowerment-scholarship-accounts/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

Research from 2016 suggests that 83 per cent of Empowerment Scholarship Account money was spent on independent school fees in the 2014/15 financial year.³⁴⁰

Education Savings Accounts³⁴¹ have become rapidly more popular in the United States in recent years, most notably with a large expansion across Florida in the last few years. There were over 320,000 US students using Education Savings Accounts in 2024, having been fewer than 30,000 students using them in 2021.

Student funding

In Arizona, Empowerment Scholarship Accounts are funded at 90 per cent of the state's per-student base funding (to approximately cover pupil costs) plus additional amounts corresponding to the student's additional needs. The base amount is estimated at \$7,000 (circa £5,500 in August 2024) for 2022/23, but as the majority of Empowerment Scholarship Account students have special needs, the average value of the accounts is higher than this, estimated at \$9,523 (circa £7,500 in August 2024).

Student eligibility

All students of grades K-12 are eligible, plus those on preschool programmes for children with disabilities.

School participation

Schools are much less directly involved in this programme, as the money is transferred to parents. Parents can use the Empowerment Scholarship Account at independent schools to contribute towards fees, but schools are entitled to charge any top-ups that they wish. There were 404 participating schools in the programme in total as of 2022/23.

³⁴⁰ Butcher, J. and Burke, L.M. (2016) *The Education Debit Card II: What Arizona Parents Purchase with Education Savings Accounts*. Available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-2-The-Education-Debit-Card-II-WEB-1.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³⁴¹ ESAs is the acronym both for Education Savings Accounts in general and for the Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (which is a form of Education Savings Account). To alleviate this confusion, the names have been written in full throughout this section.

10.2 Initial steps for reform

Independent schools as key to care leaver university progression

Educational charities Lumina and RNCSF are both leading the independent schools sector efforts to transform the educational opportunities of looked after children. Their strategies complement one another considerably; Lumina provide online tutoring and support, and RNCSF coordinate fully funded independent school (typically boarding) placements – funded mostly or, in some cases, entirely, by the independent schools they attend. Evidence suggests that both are extraordinarily effective in delivering on a famously difficult issue.³⁴²

The independent review of children’s social care set out a number of key missions, one of which was to double the proportion of looked after children progressing into higher education. The last government committed to achieving this objective in their response to the review, saying:

‘We will narrow the gap in care leaver higher education participation rates compared to the general population year-on-year from 2027, with a view to this being minimal by 2030.’³⁴³

This is a difficult task and very little progress has been made to date.³⁴⁴

Children who grow up in social care are some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in society. The opportunity for independent schools to play a significant role in transforming the lives and opportunities of some of these children should be front and centre for both the government’s educational children’s social care policy, and the sector’s transformational bursaries vision in the medium-term.

A fundamentally important part of this reform is that it has been shown – even though it requires government investment – to save the government money in the long-term. This would be a financially, as well as socially, beneficial avenue for the government.³⁴⁵

A defined government strategy is needed to articulate how they are going to drive up the care leaver university progression rate, and the continued expansion of Lumina and RNCSF should form part of this strategy.

³⁴² See, for example, Lumina. *About us*. Available at: <https://lumina.org.uk/About-Us> (Accessed: 12 August 2024). Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation. *About us*. Available at: <https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/about-us> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³⁴³ Department for Education (2023) *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/642460653d885d000fdade73/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf (Accessed: 2 September 2024), p111.

³⁴⁴ Young, F. and Lilley, D. (2023) *Breaking the care ceiling*. Civitas. Available at: <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³⁴⁵ Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*, Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

Pupil premium eligibility

In the short run, the ability of the independent sector to provide transformational bursaries to disadvantaged children can be improved through allowing independent schools to be eligible for pupil premium funding.

The pupil premium grant is funding designed ‘to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils’ – it is a pupil-based entitlement paid to schools for pupils eligible for free school meals at some point in the last six years or that have been previously looked after by a local authority or other state care.

The level of the entitlement depends on the age and type of eligibility of the pupil. For the 2024/25 financial year, the school-based pupil premium entitlement was as below.

Table 10.1: Pupil premium funding rates for the 2024 to 2025 financial year

Funding criteria	Amount of funding for each primary-aged pupil per year	Amount of funding for each secondary-aged pupil per year
Pupils who are eligible for free school meals, or have been eligible in the past six years	£1,480	£1,050
Pupils previously looked after by a local authority or other state care	£2,570	£2,570

Source: Department for Education (2024) *Pupil premium: overview*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium#funding-paid-to-schools> (Accessed: 2 September 2024).

This would come with a direct cost to the Treasury – all disadvantaged children at independent schools would now receive a pupil premium entitlement, paid to the school. A large majority of children on pupil premium satisfy the former (Free School Meals (FSM)) criterion, meaning that there would be an average cost to the treasury at an estimated £1,600 per eligible pupil at an independent school.

This would also, however, come with an indirect cost saving to the treasury, depending on the impact that it had on the incidence of disadvantaged pupils at independent schools. The treasury would save around £7,000-£8,000 for each pupil that moved from the state to the independent school sector, depending on each pupils’ level of additional needs funding.

This policy could be extended in the medium-term by tailoring the imposition of VAT on independent school fees such that those pupils eligible for pupil premium had VAT exempt fees, further incentivising independent schools to focus on having a greater number of disadvantaged pupils in their intake.

This VAT exemption would need to include a VAT rebate for the part of these pupils fees that were subsidised in bursaries by the school – very few disadvantaged children would be paying a large proportion of their own fee. This would mean, for example, that if a disadvantaged child was charged £5,000 of a £20,000 fee, the school would pay no VAT on

the £5,000 and would get a VAT rebate of £3,000 (20 per cent of the £15,000 discount). This rebate would come out of the overall VAT that the school was charged.

Both of these steps would move the dial towards making it easier for independent schools to admit a greater proportion of disadvantaged pupils, but would only benefit independent schools that took on disadvantaged pupils, providing no benefit whatsoever to independent schools otherwise. It would also, through this, improve educational opportunity for these disadvantaged children, as it would make independent schooling a more realistic possibility.

The pupil premium eligibility could be introduced on a trial basis on the condition that it came with an increase in the proportion of disadvantaged children in each new intake from independent schools of at least five per cent over the course of three years. If it did not meet this, it would be rescinded. If it came with an increase of at least 10 per cent, it would result in an expansion to VAT exemption for these children as well.

Independent school bursary charity

Adjacent to this, the independent schools sector could initiate and collaborate on the launching of a bursary charity. This charity would have the expressed purpose of increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children educated in the independent sector. Although a commendable initiative in its own right, this would ideally complement the pupil premium eligibility and act to ensure that the target of a 10 per cent increase in disadvantaged children is met to ensure the introduction of the VAT exemption.

For independent schools, bursary provision comes with a significant administrative cost and means-testing standards vary across the sector. The launching of a standalone and centralised bursary charity that independent schools paid an annual contribution to would set an exciting precedent on the side of independent schools for making use of economies of scale in order to provide best practice bursaries with minimal overhead costs across the sector.

It would not be without its challenges. Most obviously, bursary programs tend to rely on generous giving from parents and alumni, who are often motivated by a strong emotional connection to the specific school that they are donating to. This would need to be addressed in a thoughtful way, perhaps by ensuring that a substantial proportion of independent school bursary charity contributions were invested back into the school that they came from, with only a proportion being redistributed across the rest of the sector.

This charity would also facilitate better research into what works for independent school bursary provision and the positive long-term impact of bursaries. It would also allow research into the cost-effectiveness of different bursary provision for schools, to understand the financial value to the government of an independent school bursary place, as RNCSE have done with their Broadening Educational Pathways programme (see Chapter 5.2).

10.3 Opportunity for long-term reform

If these exciting initial steps were found to be successful, which could be measured by a further 10 per cent increase in the number of disadvantaged children at independent schools in the three years following the VAT exemption (for a compound total of 21 per cent over six years), it would allow policymakers to open the door to consider larger scale structural reform to expand the transformational educational opportunities for disadvantaged children at independent schools.

Basic structure: National Funding Formula Entitlement

The first question is the basic structure of the subsidy. In the Assisted Places Scheme, the subsidy was a means-tested reimbursement – independent schools set the fee and then the state reimbursed parents according to their household income. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is a type of voucher scheme where parents receive their state school allocation and can use it for a free place at a state school or a subsidised place at an independent school. The Arizona scheme is an Education Savings Account, the important difference being that, unlike a voucher, the money can be spent on all educational spending, not just a school place.

If there were to be an English scheme, it would be most sensible for it to be a selected extension of the National Funding Formula Entitlement.

School funding is already administered according to an entitlement scheme, as discussed, and therefore it would be very simple for some students to be able to use this entitlement at a state or independent school. This would mean that the state subsidy would be exactly equal to what the state would spend on this student anyway, so would be, in a sense, cost neutral.

This removes the problem of wasteful spending as it is exactly the same as the state allocation per pupil.

Selecting independent school participants, and top-up fees

The next question is how independent school participants are chosen, and how many pupils each participating independent school takes.

The question here is how to ensure it targets the most disadvantaged and is socially transformational. It relates very closely to questions of top-up fees, hence these two parameters have been considered together.

When top-up fees are **not** permitted, then the income that independent schools receive from entitlement students is capped at the entitlement level. In England, this would be likely to be much lower than the fee schools would ordinarily charge.

Consequently, independent schools are unlikely to want all of their pupils to be entitlement pupils, as their income would fall tremendously. These schools receive a significant

advantage from entitlement students as it provides a way of increasing socioeconomic inclusivity in the schools that is much less expensive than full bursaries. Indeed, if they consider it to be a subsidisation of their bursary provision, then it is a large financial benefit. Evaluated another way, they receive a significant disadvantage as they realistically receive £5,000 to £10,000 less income per entitlement student than they would from fees.

The most obvious way to do this in England, and comparing with how this is done in Milwaukee, is that schools which meet the quality screening criteria will set what proportion of their intake they will accept as NFF disadvantaged entitlement students, and then will take on no more than that allocation. The schools will then retain all of their previous autonomy in the allocation of all other places.

In terms of aim 1, making high-quality education more accessible for less affluent families, top-up fees are highly detrimental to independent school access *for less affluent families*. But top-up fees for more affluent families seem reasonable, if they are to be eligible at all, as in the Milwaukee programme.

In terms of aim 3, reducing the resource gap between state and independent schools, prohibiting top-up fees is highly advantageous, as – all else being equal – taking on NFF entitlement students brings independent school per-pupil income closer to state school per-pupil income.

Eligibility restrictions

The third question is which students are eligible to claim the NFF entitlement. Restricting eligibility to less affluent students has positive and negative effects on subsidised access programmes.

Most obviously, the more restricted the provision of the entitlement, the less that there is a market effect in education (fewer parents with additional agency to vote with their feet) and therefore the opportunity for efficiency gains (aim 2) through parental choice and accountability is weakened.

On the other hand, the less restricted the eligibility is, the less the entitlement system functions well at providing aim 1, making high-quality independent schooling more accessible for the less advantaged. Unless eligibility is restricted somewhat, the risk is that it simply provides another channel of access for already advantaged families to send their children to the best and most expensive schools. This was a major concern many had around the Assisted Places Scheme.

Also, if top-up fees are prohibited, then there becomes a serious risk that unrestricted eligibility will lead to independent schools finding it extremely difficult to successfully charge fees to any students. If all families are able to access independent schools through state funded entitlements without any risk of top-up fees, then it is hard to see parents ever choosing to access independent schools through paying.

There is also a concern of a ‘cliff-edge’ effect in terms of families seeking to lower their incomes in order to be eligible for the entitlement. The first way that the Milwaukee Program addresses this, which is extremely important, is that once a family is in the programme, they cannot be removed from it due to their circumstances improving. This is also true of the current Free School Meals framework in the UK – once you are eligible, you are eligible until the end of primary/secondary school. The second way is to ensure that eligibility is tight enough that adverse incentives are much less likely to apply as parents would not seek those circumstances. This provides another reason to specifically target disadvantage.

The Milwaukee programme initially restricted eligibility significantly, and has slowly relaxed this over the decades, with only families with an income exceeding roughly three times the federal poverty line ineligible. In the UK, this would approximately correspond to capping eligibility for a couple with two children at a household income of circa £75,000, or circa £55,000 for a lone parent with two children, such that those whose household income exceeded these thresholds were ineligible.³⁴⁶

Given knowledge of the Assisted Places Scheme’s consequences, and given the fact that aim one is specifically focused on improving the prospects of the most disadvantaged, this seems too high. **Specifically targeting disadvantage – perhaps through an existing measure such as those who are eligible for Free School Meals or the Pupil Premium – seems preferable.**

There is also a concern that wide eligibility would risk exacerbating the ‘squeezed middle’ effect in England, and that there would be a de facto ‘cliff-edge’ at middle-incomes where the entitlement is unavailable but independent schools remain inaccessible. This is a strong reason for strict eligibility. This would also ensure that this extension complements the specialist independent school grant.

Another group that could be included in the entitlement extension would be children with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP). This could potentially end up providing a cost saving to government due to the high cost of special schooling and the current strain on provision by expanding the independent special schools market by moving their conditions nearer to state special schools.

Admission to oversubscribed schools

The fourth question is how schools choose which entitlement students to take when they have more applications than allocated places, and whether participating independent schools are free to decide this for themselves.

The most obvious concern with allowing selection here is the risk that it would compromise targeting the most disadvantaged in the provision of these places. Another major concern is that selectivity would stratify students and deepen inequality. A large amount of this

³⁴⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024) *UK Poverty 2024*. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk> (Accessed: 12 August 2024) p147.

concern is alleviated by restricting eligibility, and there is a risk that without any selection effect, the students for whom the independent school place would be most appropriate are no more likely to receive the place than those for whom it would be inappropriate.

This suggests that independent schools should have limited selectivity. Those that are oversubscribed should be given autonomy over selecting which pupils to admit, with the expectation that they fill allocated places. Those who are not oversubscribed will not have this selectivity.

There is also a significant concern geographically. It is a well-established and often mentioned fact that many students in England go to weaker schools because they do not live close to any high-quality schools.³⁴⁷ If geographical selectivity is prohibited in an entitlement system, this could significantly dampen this effect, as pupils are able to access schools further away from home through the entitlement scheme.

This geographic concern is also well-established the other way, where house prices are much higher nearer top schools, especially top state schools, such that these schools become much less accessible to less affluent students. Prohibiting geographic selectivity from *all* participating schools could significantly alleviate this and provide an additional fairness benefit of subsidised access, where a current regulation (catchment areas) creates unintended consequences (socioeconomic stratification at state schools) in the market.

This could mean that although those schools which are oversubscribed would be allowed to be selective, geography may not be a factor that they could select on the grounds of. Alternatively, selectivity could be isolated only to academic selectivity.

This introduces the question of transportation costs.

Transportation costs

For the entitlement to decouple residence and school choice, they have to have a built in mechanism through which transportation to school is not an impediment to school choice for parents. This would add a degree of efficiency in the market; parents can only vote with their feet if their children are feasibly able to go to a large number of schools.

Consequently, within reason, it would be highly advantageous if this system can include transportation cost provision to participating families. This is something that the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program does.

Summary

The overarching long-term reform is to extend the state National Funding Formula entitlement for the most disadvantaged children so that it includes independent schools.

³⁴⁷ Croft, J. et al (2013) *School vouchers for England: Harnessing choice and competition for greater quality and equality in education*. Adam Smith Institute. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56edde762cd9413e151ac92/t/56fac25a04426263594bc3af/1459274334774/Voucher+paper+web.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

This section has suggested five design features to ensure that this entitlement maximises the opportunity and minimises any risks. First, independent schools offering a set number of places, and only having selectivity if oversubscribed, would ensure that ‘cream-skimming’ and stratification is minimised, whilst also ensuring that the best matches can be identified for popular schools. Eligibility being restricted to only disadvantaged students – perhaps measured through FSM (with consideration for the students moving to independent schools) – would ensure that the entitlement is appropriately targeted to where it can transform disadvantage. Top-up fees being prohibited would ensure that the most disadvantaged students are not excluded from the entitlement, and provision of transportation costs would provide an additional safeguard for access for the most disadvantaged students.

Part 4:

A vision for the future of independent schooling

Rising to meet ambition and provide opportunities: Four futures to explore

Part 3 evaluated the evidence behind possible avenues for the development of a successful independent sector for the next generation, looking at historical and international examples to understand how policies could best be implemented. This lead us to a vision for the future of independent schooling, articulated in four strands:

- 1. Enhancing partnerships with state schools.*
 - 2. Community hubs delivering on society's greatest needs.*
 - 3. Specialist and mid-market independent schooling.*
 - 4. Levelling the playing field for the most disadvantaged.*
-

Enhancing partnerships with state schools

Improving partnership work over the long-term is an important aspiration and key for a collaborative independent school sector. There is a large educational benefit to the sharing and better utilisation of educational resources across the state and independent sectors. There is also a large social benefit to a closer relationship between the independent and state school sectors, and partnerships provide a tangible political motivation to improve their public and political reputation and the public understanding of their ethos and operations.

The great growth of the last two decades on partnership activity can be developed with refinements in strategy from the independent sector, state schools, and the government.

For larger, structural opportunities, cross-sector organisations such as the Chartered College of Teaching, Association of School and College Leaders and National Governance Association will be fundamentally important as they set the precedent for organisations running across the independent and state school sectors.

Recommendations to enhance independent-state school partnerships

1. Independent school organisation: A sector-wide standard on the definition and reporting of partnership activity

If the four-type Schools Partnership Alliance guide on how to categorise partnerships can be adopted sector-wide as the framework from which all partnerships should be reported, this allows clarity on what partnerships are, what they look like and their impact. Such reporting would necessarily need to be commensurate with the size and capabilities of schools.

This could be implemented by making this style of reporting the template in Schools Together contributions from schools.

2. Government coordination: Department for Education regional directors launching regional partnership databases for matching supply with demand

Once these regional databases have been embedded, it facilitates regional directors of the Department for Education taking responsibility for helping coordinate well reported independent-state school partnerships to embed them across the country. This would be in keeping with the spirit of the Joint Understanding.

3. Regional DfE partnership directors joining teacher training and CPD

This in turn would lay the foundation for larger cross-sector collaboration, such as a government commitment to joining up Initial Teacher Training (ITT) schemes with placements visits and shared CPD within each region.

Community hubs delivering on society's greatest needs

It is the view of the Commission that the independence of activity and thinking in the independent sector is its heartbeat. The sector is also one that seeks to collaborate, and the opportunities for benefit in this collaboration extend beyond independent-state school partnerships.

This allows a socially entrepreneurial heart for the sector, looking to areas of social need and evaluating how independent schools can contribute to British society. There are a number of possible avenues here to explore. These are not all appropriate for all independent schools, but they are strong threads from the evidence the Commission has collected.

Recommendations for schools as community hubs meeting social need

4. Define a school 'community hub'

A broader understanding of independent schools partnering with local communities can be defined through an understanding of 'community hubs'. Community hub schools host activities that enhance their local community. The Confederation of School Trusts (CST) understanding of 'community anchoring' could be used as a framework from which to build this understanding.

5. Explore opportunities for 'anchoring' community hubs

- **Independent schools as neighbourhood health centres for GP appointments.** With the new government comes wider partnership opportunities for independent schools to meet social need. The new Labour government's manifesto promised out-of-hospital neighbourhood health centres³⁴⁸ to make it easier to get face-to-face GP appointments. Independent schools can offer their facilities on evenings and weekends to contribute to this and widen their role as community hubs of partnership.
- **Independent schools and the Community Pharmacist Prescribing Service.** Independent schools could also explore offering their buildings and resources for onsite out-of-hours pharmaceutical services, and partner with local health services in this provision.
- **Independent schools and the partnership opportunity with the Family Hubs Network.** The Family Hubs Network already includes school-based family hubs,³⁴⁹ and give some leading examples of this. Partnership with Family Hubs would allow independent schools to provide 'cradle to career'³⁵⁰ support from maternity to post-school for parents and children, especially families that have experienced breakdown.
- **Independent schools partnering with government on nursery provision.** An ambition shared by the major parties is to offer free childcare to all children of working parents from the age of nine months. In response to this, the current government has promised

³⁴⁸ Labour Party (2024) *Labour Party Manifesto*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024) page 98.

³⁴⁹ The Family Hubs Network. *School-based Hubs*. Available at: <https://familyhubsnetwork.com/hubs/types-of-family-hubs/hubs-in-schools/> (Accessed: 2 July 2024).

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

to expand the supply of nursery provision.³⁵¹ A complement to the government's approach could be to offer grants to existing independent schools that begin to offer nursery provision, or to significantly expand existing nursery provision.

6. Explore opportunities for 'innovating' community hubs

- **Reduce overhead costs through the use of technology.** Independent schools have already been highly proactive in looking to capitalise on the educational opportunities of technology. One particular avenue of technology utilisation that could provide school system-wide benefit would be to reduce the overhead costs of running a school and reduce teacher workload through technology and artificial intelligence (AI).
- **Online schooling.** Another exciting avenue through which independent schools can utilise technology, and one where they can also look to partner with state schools, is to explore the capability of online schooling in the independent schools sector. There are already examples of this, as discussed in Chapter 8.

7. Coordinating innovation through one overarching ISC innovation hub

Considering that the independent sector's ability to innovate is one of the key ways it understands its benefit to society, it seems sensible that it should be a key function of independent schools collaborating with one another. Existing ISC associations could work together on this and bring their respective innovation and improvement groups under one banner for the benefit of the sector as a whole. This slightly different approach to an independent school association could suggest a wider review from the sector of the structure of independent school associations based on efficiency, clarity and economies of scale.

Specialist and mid-market independent schooling

First, exploring specialist and mid-market independent schooling can address accessibility of independent schools at the margin through affordability. Through protecting specialist schooling it can also nurture the sector's cultural breadth and independence of activity, thought and creativity.

Those on middle incomes want to aspire to give their children the best schooling possible, and the Commission's polling suggests that if they could, almost half of parents that do not currently would purchase independent schooling, and many of these parents exist on the margin between independent schooling being affordable with sacrifices and straightforwardly unaffordable. The Commission's polling suggests that as many as a sixth of parents exist on this margin.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Labour Party (2024) *Labour Party Manifesto*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf> (Accessed: 12 August 2024) p66.

³⁵² This is parents who responded to the question 'Would you say that you can or cannot afford to send your child(ren) to a private school, setting aside any bursaries or scholarships that might be available?' by answering 'Yes – but only with great difficulty'.

And yet the mid-market hardly exists – fewer than two per cent of school places have fees above £0 but less than £13,000.³⁵³ This mid-market exists in many other countries such as Denmark, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, where there is some public funding of independent schooling.³⁵⁴

This accessibility challenge has the potential to work alongside other opportunities for the independent sector in the future. Specialist schooling, particularly faith schools and those with a distinctive educational ethos, generally exists in this mid-market and therefore protecting this would work in step with any advancing of mid-market independent schooling.

Policies targeted specifically at mid-market and specialist independent schools, including the possibility of some central funding, could further this vision. This could also be done in a way to improve the quality of existing specialist provision.

Specialist and mid-market independent schooling recommendations

8. A government commitment to a better understanding of the independent schools sector

Advocates and critics of the independent schools sector alike agree that the sector is not sufficiently well understood by government.³⁵⁵ The Commission highlights that at the very least, the Department for Education should know the charitable status and fees of every independent school, alongside existing data on religious character and size.³⁵⁶

9. Independent schools sector to commission research into exploring the viability and circumstances of mid-market independent schools

This research can critically examine whether the mid-market of independent schooling could present an opportunity for an affordable future for an aspirational independent education sector.

Long-term reform

10. New generation of specialist and mid-market independent schools

Independent schools that are specialist – innovating or preserving cultural heritage and religious freedom – should receive partial state funding, as should those that are mid-market, conditional on their accessibility. This could be done with a specialist and mid-market independent school grant.

³⁵³ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

³⁵⁴ This is the focus of Chapter 7: Independent schools within the wider school system: International case studies.

³⁵⁵ This is clear in the missions of both Private Education Policy Forum, who call to abolish independent schooling, and the Independent Schools Council, who represent independent schools. See: Private Education Policy Forum. Available at: <https://www.pepf.co.uk/about/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024). And Independent Schools Council. Available at: <https://www.isc.co.uk/> (Accessed: 12 August 2024).

³⁵⁶ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 15 March 2024).

Here, religious and/or otherwise specialist schools, as well as mid-market independent schools, would be eligible to a fee-indexed government grant of up to £4,000 per pupil, so long as their annual fees are below £12,000.

The maximum grant is approximately £4,000, half of the state school funding rate. It is gradually removed for schools charging annual fees in excess of £4,000, with independent schools losing 50p of grant funding for each £1 fee increase between £4,000 and £12,000.

- **A long-term vision of a thriving and aspirational independent school sector across the whole of England**

In the long-term, Recommendation 10 can facilitate a vision of independent schooling where the barriers to entry and exit of *the independent sector* for schools are lowered; where independent schools can become Academies and Academies can become independent schools. An intermediary option, alongside existing state boarding schools, facilitates this exploration.

This government grant – and the possible long-term Academy to independent school conversion possibility – would indicate a paradigm shift in the opportunity for high-quality independent education outside of London and the South East.

Levelling the playing field for the most disadvantaged

When looking to understand areas where the independent schools sector can extend its excellence and acclaim and make large positive change to the English education system, targeting disadvantage is highly desirable. It addresses the major accessibility challenge from the other end to that of mid-market schooling, providing access to the most disadvantaged. It goes with the grain of what the sector has done for centuries and with what the sector wants to achieve.³⁵⁷ It also looks to relieve child poverty, as governments of all parties want to do.

The large amount of money schools put into means-tested fee assistance shows significant promise, and specific initiatives such as the RNCSF are extremely exciting, but 6.0 per cent of pupils were on means-tested bursaries equal to at least 25 per cent of their fee in 2014,³⁵⁸ and 5.4 per cent were in 2024.³⁵⁹

Creative and radical thinking is needed to change this over the long-term. The Commission explores what policies could be implemented to allow the most disadvantaged children genuine access to excellent independent schooling.

³⁵⁷ Turner, D. (2015) *The Old Boys: The Decline and Rise of the Public School*. Yale University Press New Haven and London

³⁵⁸ Independent Schools Council (2014) *ISC Census 2014*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/2466/2014_annualcensus_isc.pdf (Accessed: 1 July 2024).

³⁵⁹ Independent School Council (2024) *ISC census and annual report 2024*. Available at: https://www.isc.co.uk/media/uukn4r3i/isc_census_2024_15may24.pdf (Accessed: 17 June 2024).

Recommendations targeting disadvantage

11. Transforming educational opportunity for looked-after children through RNCSF and Lumina

The RNCSF Broadening Educational Pathways initiative is an extraordinary example of how independent schools can transform the lives of the most disadvantaged and forgotten children in our society – looked-after children. From 2021 to 2023, the number of new placements doubled from 33 to 65. Outcomes have been brilliant.³⁶⁰

RNCSF's ambition is that: 'if 7% of all school-aged children in the UK are currently educated privately, then so too could 7% of eligible children in and on the edge of care.'³⁶¹

A defined government strategy is needed to articulate how they are going to drive up the care leaver university progression rate, and the continued expansion of Lumina and RNCSF should form part of this strategy.

12. Pupil premium independent school eligibility

Pupil premium, where disadvantaged pupils are entitled to additional state funding for their schooling, paid to state schools, should be made eligible on a trial basis to disadvantaged children attending independent schools, conditional on increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children at independent schools.

This trial basis would last three years, and the number of disadvantaged children would have to increase by at least 5 per cent for it to continue beyond that, and, if it increased by over 10 per cent, it would incrementally expand to VAT exemption, as below.

13. Pupil premium VAT exemption

If the initial trial period is shown to be successful in increasing the proportion of disadvantaged children at independent schools, then it should be expanded such that independent school fees of disadvantaged children are VAT exempt as well. This should have the same three-year trial period, and, in the case of success, move to long-term reform.

14. Independent schools bursary charity

Alongside the initial pupil premium independent school eligibility, the independent sector should launch a new bursary charity that would take annual contributions from independent schools in order to work together as a sector to increase the number of disadvantaged children at independent schools. This would have to be done in a way that preserved the connection with specific schools upon which many donations are made.

³⁶⁰ Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation (2023) *Broadening Educational Pathways for looked after & vulnerable children*, Available at: https://www.royalspringboard.org.uk/files/ugd/9d6b54_b3f12001f9b24b91913479cf92e7865f.pdf (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

³⁶¹ Ibid.

It would have the expressed target of meeting both incremental targets of recommendations 12 and 13, ensuring the foundations are laid for long-term reform.

Long-term reform

15. Extend the state National Funding Formula entitlement for the most disadvantaged children so that it includes independent schools

Currently, all children have a specific allocation of central funding that they are entitled to for their schooling, according to the National Funding Formula (NFF),³⁶² but independent schools are excluded from this. Children – however disadvantaged – cannot claim this government support if they go to an independent school.

This should change. NFF entitlement should be available to the most disadvantaged children, irrespective of what school they go to. This can be achieved through a disadvantaged independent entitlement system, where independent schools receive the NFF entitlement, but only the NFF entitlement, for the eligible children that they admit each year. This could also be extended to include children with an EHCP.

Top-up fees would be prohibited. Further detail on this recommendation was discussed in Chapter 10.3.

The independent schools sector is facing one of its greatest ever challenges. As well as being a substantial cost-shock, the paradigm-shifting VAT and business rates policy represents a wider view that the success of the independent sector and of the wider education system are at odds with one another. The Commission lays out a different perspective, outlining a positive, constructive, and hopeful path for independent education that can work for all children, both within and outside of the sector. Together, the reforms outlined could bring about the vision for an independent school sector that is excellent, culturally broad, independent, accessible and collaborative. The Commission has shown the independent sector has a proud track record of innovation and boldness. These traits are needed now more than ever.

³⁶² Department for Education (2023) *The national funding formulae for schools and high needs*, Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/651d2587bef21800156ded01/National_funding_formula_for_schools_and_high_needs_2024_to_2025.pdf (Accessed: 2 July 2024).

Appendix 1: Methodology for independent schools statistics

Over the course of October 2023 to March 2024, Civitas undertook an extensive consultation exercise under the title question ‘A vision for the future of independent schooling in England: What needs to change?’

Appendix 1.1: Get Information About Schools and ISC annual census datasets

The data in this section has two sources, the first is the Department for Education’s Get Information About Schools (GIAS) portal, which has been updated for the 2024/25 academic year.³⁶³ This dataset has 591,856 independent school pupils across 2,442 independent schools (excluding city technology colleges (CTCs)), of which 1,293 schools teaching 511,789 pupils are inspected by the Independent Schools’ Inspectorate (ISI) and 1,149 schools teaching 80,067 pupils are inspected by Ofsted. This is how we have categorised ‘association’ and ‘non-association’ independent schools. These numbers do not perfectly mirror ISC data, which has 512,588 ISC pupils at 1,339 member schools in England. Although not a perfect match, these are extremely similar.

The non-associations dataset does include some schools that are registered as having zero pupils. In general, these schools are included in the reporting. Where they have been omitted it has been specified.

The statistics also show an extremely close match on school by school pupil counts, age range, geography, sex of intake and boarding. There are some reasonably small discrepancies in terms of the presence of sixth forms and nurseries, this also provides some indication as to the discrepancy in the number of schools. Throughout, it has been made clear which of the two datasets has been used.

³⁶³ Department for Education. *Get Information About Schools*. Available at: <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/> (Accessed: 3 October 2023).

Appendix 2: Consultation evidence

Appendix 2.1: Evidence sessions, interviews and parliamentary roundtable

This consultation had four arms. The first was a survey of school leaders, where a 12-question survey was distributed amongst the Independent Schools Council members. We received 189 responses to this survey. The details of this are in Appendix 2.2.

The second was a set of interviews with leading members of the various independent schools associations. In this arm we interviewed 14 leaders, over the course of 13 in-depth interviews.

The third was a set of evidence sessions, where we invited selected expert witnesses in the field of education, including a range of critics and advocates alike, to discuss the future of the sector in England. In this arm we received evidence from 25 expert witnesses over the course of 14 evidence sessions.

The fourth arm was a Parliamentary Roundtable hosted in Portcullis House in January 2024 under the same title 'A vision for the future of independent schooling in England: What needs to change?'. Each of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties were represented in this discussion.

Over the course of the consultation process we received 46 hours of evidence, measured as the sum of all consultation sessions plus time spent by respondents on the survey. This amounted to just under 235,000 words.

Our list of consultees is:

Interviewees: **Lorraine Davidson** (CEO) of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), **Chris Fairbank** (Director of Communications) of the Heads' Conference (HMC), **Kate Hollyer** (Executive Director, Legal and Public Affairs) of the BSA Group, **Richard Harman** (CEO) of the Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools, **Melanie Horsborough** (Director of Member Services) of the Heads' Conference (HMC), **Rudi Elliott Lockhart** (CEO) of the Independent Schools Association (ISA), **John Murphie** (COO) of the Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA), **Dominic Norrish** (CEO) of the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS), **Clive Rickart** (CEO) of the Society of Heads, **Donna Stevens** (CEO) of the Girl's Schools Association (GSA), **Emma Verrier** (CEO) of the Welsh Council of Independent Schools (WCIS), **David Walker** (Director) of the Boarding Schools' Association (BSA) and (Executive Director, Boarding) BSA Group, **David Woodgate** (CEO) of the Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA).

Expert witnesses: **Tom Arbuthnott**, Deputy Head (Partnership) at Eton College, Chair of the Schools Partnerships Alliance, **Katharine Birbalsingh CBE**, Headteacher at Michaela Community School, **Oliver Blond**, CEO of Schools Partnerships Alliance, **Jeffrey Boakye**, Author and broadcaster, **Dr Simon Camby**, Group Education Director at Cognita Schools, **Sir Jon Coles**, Group CEO of United Learning, **Sam Coutinho**, Director of Sam Coutinho

Consulting Ltd., **Michael Drake**, CEO, Europe and North America, Cognita Schools, **Jason Fletcher**, Headmaster at the Heritage School, Cambridge, **Evelyn Forde MBE**, former headteacher and Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) President 2022-23, **David Goodhew**, Managing Director, Duke's Education, **Professor Francis Green**, University College London and co-founder of Private Education Policy Forum, **Ali Henderson**, CEO of the Royal SpringBoard Foundation, **Dr David James**, Author and Deputy Headteacher at Lady Eleanor Holles School, **Dr Emma Margrett FCCT**, Head of Westminster Abbey Choir School, **Duncan Murphy**, Director of Education and Charity for MTM Consulting, **Will Orr-Ewing**, Founder and Director of Keystone Tutors, **Dr Eve Poole OBE**, Author and Chair of the Woodward Corporation, **Gavin Rice**, Project Director – Future of Conservatism at Onward think-tank, **Tom Richmond**, Founder and Director of the EDSK think tank, **Sir Anthony Seldon**, Author and educator, **Jonathan Simons**, Partner and Head of Education at Public First, **Dr Joseph Spence**, Dulwich College, **Jess Staufenberg**, Investigative journalist and co-founder of Private Education Policy Forum, **Heather Styche-Patel**, CEO of RSAcademics, **Ed Vainker**, CEO of the Reach Foundation.

Parliamentarians: **Baroness Garden of Frognal**, **Andrew Lewer MBE MP**, **Lord Lucas**, **Lord Naseby**, **Lord Storey**, and an unnamed Labour peer.

Appendix 2.2: Survey of school leaders

The respondents to the school leaders survey were a reasonably representative sample of school leaders in the ISC.

Q1: Job title

- Fifty-seven per cent of respondents were heads and a further three per cent were executive heads.
- Twenty-five per cent of respondents were bursars.
- Fifteen per cent of respondents were owner/proprietors, governors, or from other roles in the school.

Q2: Age range of school

- As with the independent sector overall, the majority of respondents' schools had pupils below Year 7 and above Year 8, meaning that they were classified as 'all-through schools' in this survey. Fifty-eight per cent were leaders of all-through schools, 28 per cent junior schools and 14 per cent senior schools.

Q3: Number of pupils

- Respondents were on average from slightly larger schools than the average across the ISC. This was to be expected due to the slight nonresponse bias in the survey – smaller schools are much less likely to have an individual with the time to take the survey.
- Eleven per cent of respondents were from schools with under 200 pupils, 15 per cent were from schools with 200-401 pupils, 28 per cent were from schools with 401-750

pupils, 17 per cent were from school with 751-1,000 pupils and 23 per cent from schools with over 1,000 pupils.

- It is likely that part of this skew is from executive head responses.

Q4: Sex of entry

- According to the sector average, the vast majority of school leaders (82 per cent) were from coeducational schools. Twelve per cent were from all-girls schools and six per cent from all boys schools.

Q5: Boarding and day

- As expected, considering that the sample disproportionately included slightly larger schools, the sample also included a slightly above average incidence of boarding schools, with 43 per cent of respondents being from schools with at least one boarder and 57 per cent from day schools.

Q6 and Q7: Charitable status and for-profit status of non-charitable schools

- Ninety per cent of the sample had charitable status. Of the other 10 per cent (18 schools), five sixths were for-profit schools.

Q8: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

- Just three per cent – six schools – of the sample were special schools or alternative provision schools.

Questions 9 to 12: Written answer questions:

Q9: Would you say that your school has a distinctive and defined ethos/character? If so, please describe in a maximum of five words.

The incidence of some specific common words is discussed throughout the Commission. The most common words were:

Appendix 2, Table 1: Most common responses to question 9 of school leaders survey

Word	Incidence
Academic	25
Holistic	15
Inclusive	13
Community	13
Family	12
Nurturing	11
Caring	11
Catholic	9
Excellence	9
Diversity	9

Note: we have included all conjugations of each of these words. For example, inclusivity is included within inclusive.

Q10: What are the main challenges facing your school and the independent sector as a whole over the next 5-10 years?

Q11: What would success, or thriving, look like for your school and the sector as a whole in 10 years' time?

Q12: In light of these, what do you think needs to change:

- a. In the independent schools' sector.
- b. Outside of the independent schools' sector.

Question 11 methodology

The only question where responses are explicitly presented in the report is question 11, where the incidence of answers within a number of categories are presented. The categories were defined in the survey responses by clustering the most common words and phrases from answers into 18 categories. The 13 most common clusters, alongside the specific word 'results', are presented below, with a specific description of their criteria.

Appendix 2, Table 2: Most common responses to question 11 of school leaders survey

Category	Answer included at least one of	Frequency
Numbers	'numbers', 'roll', 'growing' or specific reference to 'size' of 'sector'/'market'	98
Partnership	'partnerships', 'relationship with state schools'	25
Recognition	Absence of 'criticism', improving 'public perception', 'reputation', 'recognition', 'free of prejudice', 'seen as positive'	23
Survival	'still being here', or 'still being' a 'school', 'survival', 'minimal' or 'low' incidence of 'school closure'	23
Financial stability	'viability', 'stability', 'profitability', 'surplus'	19
Bursaries	'bursaries', 'fee assistance'	18
Choice	Provision of 'choice', 'variation', 'access', also 'range' and 'diversity' in the independent sector, with 'unique' offering	18
Quality	Good or high 'quality', 'excellent education', 'high standards'	18
Affordability	'affordability', 'lower fees', 'stop fee rises', 'accessible'	18
Curricular range	'breadth', 'co-curricular', 'extra-curricular', 'preserving' subjects	15
Teachers	'recruitment', 'retention', 'training', 'happy staff', 'happy teachers'	14
Leading	'champion excellence', 'leading', 'improving education', 'sharing good practice', 'contributing to society', 'innovative'	13
Pastoral	'happy children', 'flourishing children', 'pupil experience', 'pastoral'	13
Results	'results'	8

Note: 'results' was not the 14th most common, as presented, but has been selected due to having much stricter criteria (the specific word) and still a reasonable incidence.

Appendix 3: Polling evidence

Appendix 3.1: Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of polling respondents in nationally representative survey of 2,176 UK adults

Responses were segmented by demographic characteristics, including age, location, socioeconomic grouping, and political affiliation, to provide a more detailed analysis of responses and an accurate understanding of attitudes around private schools. The data have been weighted to be representative of the British adult population as a whole.

Analysis Groups

Age and generation

Respondents were grouped by age, using the following brackets:

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-54
- 55-64
- 65+

Based on stated age, respondents were also grouped into generations, defined as follows (note that the polling was conducted in January 2024):

- Gen Z: Aged 27 or under (born 1996 or later)
- Millennials: Aged 28-42 (born 1981-1996)
- Gen X: Aged 43-59 (born 1964-1981)
- Baby Boomers: Aged 60-79 (born 1944-1964)³⁶⁴

Location

Location was categorised as follows (there were no respondents from Northern Ireland, hence the use of 'British' in preference to 'UK' throughout this publication):

- London
- Rest of South
- Midlands
- North
- Wales
- Scotland

³⁶⁴ 35 respondents (1.6 per cent) were older than 79 and were not grouped into a generation.

Employment

Respondents were classified by job type according to the National Readership Survey (NRS) social grading system as either ABC1 (managerial, professional, and administrative roles) or C2DE (skilled and unskilled manual labour, casual work, unemployed).³⁶⁵

Respondents were also classified as either working or not working.

Political affiliation

Respondents were asked which party they voted for in the 2019 General Election. Those who voted for a party other than Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrats were grouped together as 'other'. Those who did not vote or could not remember which party they voted for were not included in analysis by political affiliation (but were included in polling results).

Gender

Respondents were asked whether they described themselves as male or female. A very small number (less than 0.5 per cent) answered 'I identify another way'. This group was not included in analysis by gender (but was included in polling results).

Appendix 3.2: Characteristics measured in survey of 1,673 English parents

Demographic characteristics

The following details the demographic characteristics.

Age

Respondents were asked their age in years, which was split into five groups:

- Aged 18 to 24 – this group was removed from the analysis as there were just 41 respondents aged 18-24.
- Aged 25 to 34.
- Aged 35 to 54.
- Aged 55 to 64.
- Aged 65+ – this group was removed from the analysis as there were just seven respondents aged over 65.

With respondents all being parents, the majority of respondents were aged 35-54 years, accounting for 70 per cent of respondents.

They were also split into generations according to the following age groupings:

- Gen Z: Aged 27 and under.
- Millennials: Aged 28 to 42.
- Gen X: Aged 43 to 59.
- Baby boomers: Aged 60 to 79 – this group was removed from the analysis as there were just 37 respondents that were baby boomers.

³⁶⁵ National readership survey, *Social Grade*. Available at: <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/> (Accessed: 12 February 2024).

Location

Location was categorised as follows (there were no respondents from Northern Ireland, hence the use of 'British' in preference to 'UK' throughout this publication):

- London.
- Rest of South.
- Midlands.
- North.
- Wales.
- Scotland.

Urban/suburban/rural

Respondents were asked to describe the area that they live in according to the following groupings:

- Urban setting.
- Suburban setting.
- City or sizeable town (not London).
- Smaller and fringe area.
- Village or dispersed setting.

Political affiliation

Respondents were asked which party they voted for in the 2019 General Election. Those who voted for a party other than Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrats were grouped together as 'other'. Those who did not vote or could not remember which party they voted for were not included in analysis by political affiliation (but were included in polling results).

Immigration attitude

Respondents were grouped according to their view of immigration levels, based on whether they said that 'the number of immigrants coming to the UK these days' should be 'increased' or 'decreased'.

Born in UK

Respondents were asked whether they were born in the UK.

Ethnicity

Respondents were asked their ethnicity. These were categorised as follows:

- White.
- Black or Black British.
- Asian or Asian British.
- Mixed race.
- Other – this group was removed from the analysis as just 12 respondents answered 'other'.

Number of children

Respondents were asked how many children they had; these were categorised into those with:

- One or two children.
- Three or four children.
- More than four children – this group was removed from the analysis as there were just 15 respondents with more than four children.

Those with three or more children were grouped as one subgroup in much of the socioeconomic subgroup analysis in order to ensure a sufficiently large sample (285 respondents were in this group).

Socioeconomic characteristics

The following details the socioeconomic characteristics.

Employment

Respondents were classified by job type according to the National Readership Survey (NRS) social grading system as either AB (higher and intermediary managerial or professional roles), C1 (supervisor, administrative or professional, for example policeman, nurse, secretary) C2 (skilled manual worker) or DE (semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, casual work, unemployed).³⁶⁶

Respondents were also classified as either working or not working.

Education level

Respondents were asked whether or not they had been to university.

Household income

Respondents were asked their annual household income, according to the following groupings:

- £34,000 or less.
- £34,001 to £55,000.
- £55,001 to £76,000.
- £76,001 to £97,000.
- £97,001 to £118,000.
- £118,001 to £139,000.
- More than £139,000.

House value

Respondents were asked to estimate the value of their home according to the following groupings:

³⁶⁶ National readership survey. *Social Grade*. Available at: <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/> (Accessed: 12 February 2024).

- £250,000 and under.
- £250,001 to £500,000.
- £500,001 to £1 million.
- £1 million to £2 million.
- £2 million to £3 million – this group was removed from the analysis as there were just 14 respondents with houses worth between £2 and £3 million.
- More than £3 million – this group was removed from the analysis as there were just 24 respondents with houses worth more than £3 million.

Those with an estimated house value of £1 million or more was used as a subgroup in much of the socioeconomic subgroup analysis in order to ensure a sufficiently large sample (98 respondents were in this group).

Landlord

Respondents were asked whether or not they received at least £5,000 per year in rent from properties.

Relative wealth

Respondents were asked whether they considered themselves to be better or worse off than their parents.

Existence and age of children

Respondents had to confirm that they had children aged 18 or under in their care and gave how many children they cared for.

Schooling of children

Parents answered two questions on the schooling of their children, the first was according to the following categories:

- Nursery.
- Primary.
- Middle.
- Secondary.
- An all-through school.
- 6th Form College/Further Education college.
- Special school/alternative provision/other.
- Don't know.

The second was according to the following categories:

- State community/comprehensive school (run by the local authority).
- Foundation or voluntary aided school, including church and religious schools.
- Academy school/free school.
- State grammar schools.
- Private school.

- Other.
- Don't know.

For all of the above, parents were allowed to select multiple options in case of having multiple children for which the answers were different. Those parents that had any children at private schools were also asked to confirm whether they had had any help paying fees from gifts or inheritance from family and friends or from the school.

Schooling and additional incomes of parents

Parents were asked whether they themselves had ever attended private schools. The options were the same as the second set of categories above. Finally, parents were asked which of the following sources received them an income of at least £5,000 a year:

- My regular wage/salary
- My partner's regular wage/salary
- A bonus on top of my or my partner's regular wage/salary
- Rent from one or more properties
- Return on other investment, not including property
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer.