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## Private Schools in England

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*Geoffrey Walford*

## Private Schools in England

**Zusammenfassung:** Ungefähr sieben Prozent der Schulkinder in England besuchen private Schulen, aber die politische Bedeutung des privaten Sektors reicht weit darüber hinaus. Auch heutzutage sind die traditionellen Eliteinternate wie Eton College die bekanntesten englischen Privatschulen, obwohl sie nur einen sehr geringen Anteil des Privatschulsektors ausmachen, der durch seine Vielfalt charakterisiert ist. So ist die Zahl privater muslimischer Schulen seit den 1970er Jahren im Zuge der Zuwanderung stetig angestiegen. Auch privatwirtschaftlich arbeitende Schulen haben sich etablieren können. Trotz der Diversität und fehlender empirischer Evidenz ist der Glaube weit verbreitet, dass der Privatschulsektor akademisch effektiver ist. Diese Überzeugung beeinflusst auch die Schulpolitik der Regierung in Hinblick auf den privaten wie auch den staatlichen Sektor.

### Introduction

In 2007 there were 2284 private schools in England educating some 7.2 per cent of the relevant population. Although the official name used for these schools in England is „independent“ schools, this article will follow the terminology used in the vast majority of other countries and use the term “private”. This term is now the most commonly accepted and appropriate choice (Walford 1989). The term “independent school” is defined in England as any school that provides full-time education for five or more children of compulsory education age, or one or more children with a statement of special educational need, or who is in public care, and which is not maintained by a local authority or a non-maintained special school. While the national proportion of children in private schools is about seven per cent, about half of the children in private schools are in just two of the nine geographical regions of England – London and the South East. These are the two most affluent regions. Scotland has about 3 per cent of its children in private schools while Wales and Northern Ireland have even fewer. As there are considerable differences between the systems in the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom, this paper will focus on England only.

The most widely known private schools in England are undoubtedly the old-established boarding schools that have long served the economic and political elite. Thus names like Eton College, Winchester College, Westminster School, and Cheltenham Ladies College are recognised as “brand leaders” throughout the world. Such schools are highly selective both academically and financially with Winchester having fees for boarders of £27,870 per year and Eton fees being £28,000 in 2008. It is certainly true that the children who leave these schools usually do so with a clutch of very good A-levels (school-leaving examination successes) and that they most often enter prestigious universities, but whether their success is due to the schools or to the children’s own social, economic and cultural capitals is open to question.

But such well-known schools are only a very small part of the English private sector. Far from being a homogeneous group of schools, in practice, the private sector in England is highly diverse (Hillman 1994). There are some obvious ways in which the schools differ in terms of clearly observable variables such as age range and gender of pupils, size, religious affiliation and geographical location, but the schools also differ greatly in their culture, history and traditions and in the experiences that pupils receive. While some are highly selective by academic ability, others are more comprehensive in their intakes or may even cater for children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

No official record is made of the religious orientation of the schools. The Faith in the System report (DCSF 2007) claimed that around 900 (nearly 40 per cent) private schools in England had a religious character. This includes a diverse array of faiths from Jewish, Methodist, Moravian or Quaker, to Anglican, Christian Science, Seventh Day Adventist, or Unitarian. Over 500 are linked to the Church of England, and 145 are Roman Catholic.

### **A brief history**

In England, before the nineteenth century the education of children was considered to be the private affair of parents. The type of schooling that children received depended to a great extent on the social class of their parents. The majority of working-class children received little or no formal schooling. If they took part in formal schooling at all, it was in charity schools linked to the churches or in a variety of Dame schools that were little more than a child-minding service to enable women to continue working. Nevertheless, as urbanization and industrialization increased throughout the eighteenth century, the sometimes contradictory drives of philanthropy, religious conviction, and the practical need for a better trained and disciplined workforce led to the gradual expansion of a network of schools for the poor. In the early nineteenth century there were various unsuccessful attempts to establish a national system of schools for working-class children, and to alleviate the grave deficiencies in general provision, accommodation and teaching found by two Parliamentary Commissions. In practice, it was not until 1833 that the government made its first donation to the two main religious providers of the day to help with the “establishment of schoolhouses”. Regular government grants soon followed, and the Newcastle Commission of 1861 found that some 95 per cent of children of the “poorer classes” attended school, even if only for four to six years. The government started to build and maintain its own schools in 1870, and elementary schooling was made compulsory for all children in 1880.

It is important to recognize that the government only became involved in the provision of schooling reluctantly because the charitable providers were unable or unwilling to provide for the children in the rapidly expanding cities. The responsibility for provision was still shared by a multitude of providers – predominantly the Christian churches. The key 1944 Education Act for England and Wales built upon this existing under-

standing. To make it possible to provide secondary schooling for all children it was seen as necessary to include as many as possible of the pre-existing secondary schools that had been founded by the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church within the state-maintained sector. While many religious schools remained as full private schools, the majority entered into arrangements with the state in one of three categories – voluntary controlled, voluntary aided or special agreement. The main distinction between the three was the degree of control that the Board of Governors maintained over the school and the size of the financial contribution expected from the Churches in return for this remaining control. While these schools retained their religious denominational character, they became an integral part of the state maintained local authority system, and received the bulk of their running costs from the state. The 1944 Education Act also gave the churches the opportunity of building new secondary schools and this was taken up vigorously by the Roman Catholics in particular (O’Keeffe 1986).

In the nineteenth century schooling for upper and middle-class children was differentiated by gender. The old and still best-known private schools were for boys only, while their sisters were often educated by tutors at home. During that century new schools were established and a disparate range of existing schools were molded into a system to educate the upper and middle classes. This restructuring first occurred for boys and was followed, at a rather leisurely pace, by similar new establishments and restructuring for girls.

At the centre of discussion of the private schools for upper-class boys is a small group of so called „Great Schools“, which were investigated by the Clarendon Commission of 1864. By 1820 the seven elite boarding schools of Eton, Winchester, Westminster, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby and Shrewsbury were being linked together as a loose group. For the first 50 years of the nineteenth century, each of these seven schools maintained a relatively static social clientele, preferring to risk lower numbers rather than admit children of lower social rank. They led a precarious existence where the number of new students would fluctuate dramatically year to year, with wild peaks and troughs, and numbers often increasing markedly on the appointment of a new headmaster. The curriculum was still mainly Latin and the classics, and no attempt was made to provide any occupational training. The boys who attended these schools were not expected to have to work for their living but live from inherited wealth and income. It was only in the 1860s and 1870s, following legislative changes as a result of the Clarendon Commission, that curriculum and financial reforms were made such that the Great Schools began to widen their social intakes and became continuously full (Shrosbree 1988).

Schooling for upper-class girls gradually followed. Cheltenham Ladies College was opened in 1854 and became a model for the girls’ boarding schools. In a similar way the North London Collegiate School was copied by a growing number of private girls’ day schools. The Girls’ Public Day School Company (later Trust: GPDST) was formed in 1872 and became a leading provider of girls’ schooling. Alongside these leading schools were a host of other private schools serving middle-class families, often based on local endowed grammar schools.

The way in which the state system gradually incorporated much of the private sector following the 1902 and 1944 Education Acts meant that, although there is still considerable diversity within the sector, the major private schools are generally more prestigious, more academically and more socially selective than in other countries (Edwards/Fitz/Whitty 1989; Walford 1991). Within the state-maintained sector, alongside schools provided and organized by the Local Authorities are, so called, voluntary schools run by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as a small number run by Jews and Methodists. As is discussed below, since 1997, there have also been a few Muslim schools, one Seventh Day Adventist, one Greek Orthodox and one Hindu school that have become part of the state-maintained sector. This means that, unlike in many other countries, parents who wish to choose a faith-based school for their children can do so without the need to pay fees for a private school.

## Diversity

There is a huge diversity of private schools in England, but the vast majority can be discussed within the various associations and groups in which they have membership. Some 80 per cent of children in private schools are educated within schools that are members of five associations which, in turn, are members of the Independent Schools Council. These five associations are: the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC), the Girls' Schools Association (GSA), the Society of Headmasters and Headmistresses of Independent Schools (SHMIS), the Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS), and the Independent Schools Association (ISA). The state-maintained independent schools (see later) are not included in these groups. The average annual fee for these schools in January 2008 was £22,059 for boarders, £12,330 for day students within boarding schools, and £9,069 for students in day schools, but there was considerable variation according to the status of the school and the age of the student (ISC 2008).

The HMC, is the oldest of these organisations, formed in 1871 in a successful attempt to ward off an early political attack on the schools. The total number of members was limited, initially to 50, but this has gradually grown to 249 (in the UK). But the HMC still includes the majority of the most prestigious schools. As the number of schools grew, so did the diversity of schools involved – a development recognised by the change in name to the Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference in the early 1990s. The range is now from the well known schools such as Eton College and Winchester College that are of ancient foundation and provide a full boarding life for highly academically able boys at very high cost, to many day schools with a range of degrees of academic selectivity which cater for children at about a quarter of the cost of the historic schools. Most schools are now coeducational, and only about 20 per cent of pupils in the HMC schools are now boarders, and 32 per cent of the pupils are girls (ISC 2008).

Even though the HMC schools only educate about a quarter of all privately educated children, most of the sociological research on the private sector has concentrated on the elite schools and, in particular, the boys' boarding schools justified through their historic position in educating the nation's elites. Important, but dated, studies include those of Wakeford (1969), Lambert and Millham (1968) and Walford (1986). Research by Reid et al. (1991) showed that a large proportion of high ranking judges, civil servants, diplomats, directors of major banks and other similar highly prestigious and powerful groups, were educated at HMC schools. In 1984, for example, 84 per cent of the top judiciary, 70 per cent of bank directors and 49 per cent of high rank civil servants were from HMC schools. More recent work by the Sutton Trust (Sutton Trust 2005a; 2005b; 2006) has shown similar overrepresentation of the private-sector educated in solicitors, barristers, judges, journalists and members of the House of Commons and House of Lords. However, it is worth remembering that, while a disproportionate number of members of the present elites attended private schools some 40 years ago, this does not necessarily mean that present-day pupils will have advantaged entry to elite positions in the future. Also, as such schools are highly academically and socially selective, such success says practically nothing about the quality of the schooling provided. In fact, most of these highly prestigious schools do not score very highly on "value added" measures of academic achievement where the measure of school effectiveness is based on the abilities of the children entering the school as well as their achievements on leaving. Entry into elite positions may have little to do with the educational success of these schools, but may be related to pre-existing social and cultural capital.

There has been surprisingly little research that has sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the private sector in comparison to the state sector in England. The most thorough study, now more than 20 years old, concluded that in terms of academic results, the leading private schools were probably no more effective than the grammar schools that were available at that time for highly able children. In contrast, the second-ranking private schools were probably more effective than the secondary modern schools that the majority of children attended (Halsey et al. 1984).

One more recent study by Sullivan and Heath (2003) indicated that the sole school-level factor that appeared to explain private schools' better examination results was the social composition of the school. This might operate through peer group processes of encouraging academic work or other mechanisms. However, there are indications that attendance at these HMC schools may be still linked to future elite status for the HMC schools provide about 25 per cent of university undergraduates and about 50 per cent of undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

While the data is limited, the financial return to private schooling seems to be surprisingly low. Dolton and Vignoles (2000) found that men who had been to a private school received a wage premium of only 6.5 per cent compared with similar state school students. They found no impact at all on the salaries of privately educated women.

Private schooling for girls has never been as popular or prestigious as that for boys, and there are fewer research studies. Although now dated, the most recent general survey is that of Wober (1971), while Avery (1991) gives a good history of the girls' schools



and Delamont (1989) concentrates on the role of the elite girls' schools in social reproduction. The organization analogous with the HMC is the Girls' Schools Association (GSA) which has some 197 schools in membership. These schools have an even wider range of size, academic emphasis, geographical location, religious affiliation and so on than the HMC schools. Most were founded in the nineteenth century and can be linked to the greater emancipation of women that occurred at that time (Walford 1993). In England in 2008, 49 per cent of private school pupils were girls. The proportion of girls being privately educated has increased faster than for boys; however some GSA schools have suffered a considerable loss of girls to HMC schools as these schools have gradually changed from all boys schools to co-educational. Over three-quarters of HMC schools now accept girls – most now taking girls at all ages, but the remainder taking girls aged 16 or over only (Dooley/Fuller 2003). The HMC schools have been very successful in attracting girls to these former all boy schools, but the girls' schools that have attempted to attract boys have been almost completely unsuccessful. Over the last two decades a number of girls' boarding schools have recently closed as a result of falling rolls, while others have joined the state-maintained sector.

Another somewhat unexpected feature about these private schools is that, while the most highly prestigious schools are generally boarding schools, the percentage of children who board is not uniformly high throughout the sector. In 2008 only 13 per cent of pupils in Independent Schools Council schools boarded, and 43 per cent of boarders were girls (ISC 2008). Overall, there has been a steady decline in the total number of boarders over the last two decades, with a decrease of some three per cent each year. The result is that many schools, even some of the well known names, now find it difficult to attract enough pupils of sufficiently high academic ability to fill their boarding places. This has led to an increase in the number of foreign students in these schools who usually have to become boarders. In 2008 there were 20,545 non-British students with parents living abroad in the ISC schools (ISC 2008). This is only 4.0 per cent of the total number of students but, as there are only 66,515 boarders, it would appear that about 30 per cent of boarders are likely to be from overseas. About 40 per cent of these foreign students are from China or Hong Kong.

Private schools that cater for children below the age of 11 or 13 are called preparatory schools. Traditionally, these schools have also been single sex, but the moves towards greater co-education at this age led, in 1981, to the amalgamation of the two separate preparatory school associations into the Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS), which was the former name of the boys' association (Leinster-Mackay 1984). This body now has some 503 schools in membership. All pupils must leave these schools by age 14, but most leave at any time between 11 and 13. It used to be that girls left to go to their secondary schools at 11, while boys stayed until entry to the HMC schools at 13, but the pattern is now much more confused. Most of these schools are far smaller than the secondary schools, and only about seven per cent of the pupils are either full or weekly boarders. While about twice as many boys board as girls, the number of boarders at this age has more than halved over the last decade. However, it is in the preparatory age range that the bulk of the recent increase in private school numbers is to

be found, particularly at pre-school and pre-prep school levels. This increase in the number of children aged under five (the age at which compulsory education starts in England) has led to a somewhat misleading overall slight increase in the number of children in the private sector.

About two thirds of all private school pupils are in schools in these three major groups, but there is an interesting diversity of schools beyond these. First, there are schools which are members of groupings which aspire to be similar to the major three. The Society of Headmasters of Independent Schools (SHMIS) shelters some 68 schools, while the “Independent Schools” Association has 263. Both of these groups generally contain schools of a lower rank than the first three. These two organizations, together with the major three, cater for about 80 per cent of pupils in the private sector, but beyond them are various other schools which do not have links with the Independent Schools Council.

### *Schools Outside the ISC*

Many of the schools not associated with the Independent Schools Council are small schools. About half of the total number of private schools have 200 or fewer students. Of particular interest are the small religiously-based schools many of which were established by parents and others who argue that the state-maintained sector does not offer an educational experience for their children which is congruent with their religious beliefs – even though there have been religious schools within the state-maintained sector for more than 100 years. There are some 80 or so evangelical Christian (Walford 2001), over 100 Muslim (Walford 2003; 2004a), and a few other Buddhist and Hindu schools.

The evangelical Christian schools share an ideology of Biblically-based evangelical Christianity which seeks to relate the message of the Bible to all aspects of present-day life whether personal, spiritual or educational. In most cases parents have a substantial role in the management and organization of the schools. The facilities are usually poor as most of the schools run on very low fees. Teachers are often not paid on national salary scales, but see their teaching as a Christian obligation of service to others. There are currently some 45 schools with membership of the major group – Christian Schools Trust – with an unsteady trend in membership (Walford 1995; 2001; Poyntz/Walford 1994). Tighter government regulations and inspection requirements have led to a sharp decline in the number of Brethren schools, organized in the Focus on Learning Trust. In 2004 there were 64, but this had declined to just 12 in 2007.

Since the 1970s there has been a steady increase in the number of Muslim private schools, linked to a growing dissatisfaction with the state-maintained schools that their children attended. Some parents felt that their children were not achieving academically as well as they might. The inner-city schools that many Muslim children attended did badly on test scores and parents became more concerned that these schools might be failing their children. They were also concerned that the standards of discipline and respect for adults found in these schools were often lower than they wished. But the main

reasons for the growth in these schools was related directly to religious beliefs. Most British Muslims are descendants of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. As they became more established and developed a variety of distinct Muslim communities, they became more religious in their outlook. As they became more religious, their concerns about both the structure and content of the state-maintained educational system grew.

In 2007 there were about 120 private Muslim schools in England. These vary considerably from one high-fee London school designed for the children of diplomats, to several poorly resourced schools in limited accommodation. Most are small with about 150 students. About a dozen are Darul Uloom institutions designed primarily to provide formal training for Imams and Islamic teachers (Open Society 2004, p. 126). In the past many of these schools have received critical reports from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), particularly because of poor buildings, inadequate resources, poor health and safety standards and the low level of education provided. Changes within the 2002 Education Act meant that all new schools were no longer able to obtain “provisional registration”, a state which allowed lower standards on a temporary basis. However, in spite of numerous closures due to poor OfSTED inspections, new schools continue to open. Overall, there appears to be a leveling-off in the number of private Muslim schools rather than a decline. It is difficult to determine exact numbers but from a handful in the 1980s, and about 40 in the mid 1990s, Hewer (2001) estimated that by 2000 there were about 70 Muslim schools, and this has risen to about 120 in 2007. The number of private Jewish schools has increased from 34 in 1997 to 51 in 2007, with corresponding increase in students from 7625 to 10976.

A further group of small private schools has developed in response to parents who do not want their children to go to all-ability comprehensive schools. For those parents able and willing to pay fees, some of these schools act to replace academically selective grammar schools that were gradually phased-out (in most areas of the country) during the 1970s and 1980s and replaced by all ability comprehensive schools. These pseudo-grammar schools are typically to be found in the Northern and Midlands cities, and emphasise an ordered and controlled environment as well as academic results. In contrast, other parents believe that the highly competitive and structured nature of state schooling is undesirable and wish their children to receive a more liberal and broader education. Taking advantage of the benefits of smaller schools and the fact that private schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum, there are now several small private schools that are designed to give more freedom to children’s individual interests. These schools have formed umbrella organizations such as the “Human Scale Movement” and “Education Now” which campaign on their behalf. The number of children in these schools and the number being “home educated” has increasing over the past few years.

But not all of the schools outside the Independent Schools Council are small. One recent development is the growth of chains of schools which are designed to be profit-making. Having groups of schools under a single management structure is not new to English schooling. The Girls Public Day School Trust is still an important player, and Nathaniel Woodard founded a group of schools in the mid nineteenth century which had

Lancing College at its head and several others linked to it providing education for boys according to their social class. But these were charitable operations. What is new is the idea that groups of private schools should have a valued brand name which would encourage parents and provide profits for the shareholders. There had been a growth in such profit-making schools at the pre-school level during the 1990s, but the 2000s have seen a corresponding growth at compulsory school age as well. One example of such a group is GEMS which was established by Sunny Varkey, a Dubai-based entrepreneur. The group has a network of over 65 schools across six countries including the United Arab Emirates, India and England, and claims to educate over 85,000 students worldwide ([www.gemseducation.com](http://www.gemseducation.com) accessed 9/11/2008). It has been established for nearly 50 years and has the intention of building a chain of some 200 “economy class” schools. Fees were to be kept low by cutting personnel costs (staff in private schools do not need to be paid on national salary scales) and by increasing class size (Ball 2007). It currently has 11 schools in England. In early 2007 it was announced that there was to be an alliance between GEMS and the US-based Edison Schools (Whittle 2005) and that a new company would build approximately 70 private schools in major cities around the world. Another growing group is Cognita which was founded in 2004 and backed by equity capital. It started by buying 17 schools from Asquith Court, which is the UK’s second largest private nursery provider (Ball 2007) and has since added many more. It now has about 39 schools in the UK plus a few overseas. The interesting feature of this group is that it is chaired by ex-Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead, who is now also a Professor of Education at England’s only private university, the University of Buckingham. The Cognita website ([www.cognitaschools.co.uk](http://www.cognitaschools.co.uk)) champions “the values that are important to millions of parents across the country: the basic skills of literacy and numeracy; a broad and balanced curriculum which excites all children; a secure and disciplined learning environment in which each child is known and valued.” The group claims to be competitive due to high quality staff and business-oriented organisation.

## Government policy

With the exception of City Technology Colleges and Academies (to be discussed below) private schools in England receive no per-pupil funding from the state but have to rely on fees, donations and, in some cases, foundation income. Over the years, however, there have been specific schemes that have channelled government money to the private sector and over 80 per cent of ISC schools receive tax benefits as a result of their charitable status (Robson/Walford 1989). Private schools also do not have to pay Value Added Tax on their services. It is very difficult to estimate the total contribution, but the totals saving to schools is less than ten per cent of their operating costs.

Historically, in very broad terms, the Conservative Party has tended to support private schooling when in power whilst the Labour Party has generally attempted to reduce government support (Tapper 1997). Thus, the Conservative government of 1979 on-

wards introduced an Assisted Places Scheme to allow academically gifted children from poor backgrounds to attend private schools. When Labour came to office in 1997 their first Education Act abolished this scheme. But the policies of the two major political parties are closer than they once were and there are substantial continuities between the two periods of government.

One of the interesting aspects of Conservative policy between 1979 and 1997 was that there was a blurring of the boundaries between the private and state-maintained sectors and increased privatisation within the state-maintained sector. The City Technology Colleges (CTCs) which were announced in 1986 were designed to be the flagship of this process (Walford/Miller 1991). Here, private industry and commerce were expected to help finance secondary inner-city technological education alongside the government. In practice the vast majority of the costs of the buildings were paid by government and all of the current expenditure is covered on a per-pupil basis by the state. But the Colleges are officially “independent schools” owned by trusts. They have their own conditions of service and salary scales for teachers, and overall control is vested in governing bodies dominated by industry. As families have to make an application, they are able to select children from well motivated families and give them a standard of education denied to children from less educationally aware backgrounds. As is now well known, the scheme as a whole met with severe problems and only fifteen CTCs were ever established, but the increased competition, privatization and blurring of boundaries inherent in the idea were developed further in later Education Acts.

Given the difficulties that the Conservative government had experienced in trying to obtain sponsorship for CTCs, it is strange that Blair’s Labour government should eventually resurrect the policy in the form of City Academies. In 2000 David Blunkett, then Secretary of State, announced that “City Academies” were to be created – again officially independent schools, but maintained by the state. These secondary schools were to have sponsors who would give £2 million towards the capital costs and who would henceforth have a controlling interest in the school. This time they were not restricted to technology, but could also specialise in modern foreign languages, visual arts, performing arts or media arts, sport or “any subject specified by order of the Secretary of State”. Their close similarity with the CTCs was emphasised by the fact that the legislation in the Learning and Skills Act 2000 simply amended the CTC legislation as it was in the Education Act 1996. Various difficulties with the policy led to further changes in the Education Act 2002 including the word “City” being dropped such that these new schools became simply “Academies”. In many ways the story of the Academies echoes that of the CTCs, but Blair’s government was far more generous in its financial support and other assistance. Sponsors have been able to donate “in kind” to an extraordinary extent, and the average cost of the first 12 Academies was £23 million (Beckett 2007). Faith groups have seen this as an economical way of building their own schools, and the Blair government was active in trying to attract faith groups to become sponsors. In February 2008 there were 83 Academies in operation, with several more due to open in future years (DCSF 2008) and a plan for 400 by 2010. This would mean that about one-fifth of English secondary students would be in Academies. The growth of Academies

has led to some confusion in the statistics that are provided by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, as the figures for these schools which are maintained by the state are included with schools that are truly “independent” or private.

It was the Labour government that, for the first time, accepted some existing private Muslim schools into the state-maintained sector (Walford 2008a). Some of these private schools had campaigned for many years to get support from the state and might be regarded as the “reluctant private sector”. Those involved had no ideological commitment to private schooling, but simply wished to have local schools that respected their religious needs. Alongside these Muslim schools, and a few other schools for minority religious groups, the Labour government also allowed some private Catholic schools to enter the state system. It is evident that most of these Catholic schools that transferred to state-maintained status were in some financial difficulty. Several had been heavily dependent on the Assisted Places Scheme that was phased out by Labour from 1997 (Edwards et al. 1989).

This was not the only aid to the private sector offer by Labour (Tapper 2003). Within the first few months the new Labour government had established an advisory group to focus on the development of partnerships between the state and independent sectors. Three “golden rules” for Labour’s new attitude towards private schools were set out. First, high standards in independent schools will not be compromised; second, change will be voluntary; third, there will be no imposition from above. It was also announced that £600,000 was to be made available for a partnership scheme between independent and state maintained schools. Small grants of up to £25,000 were made available for innovative schemes involving literacy, technology, sport, music, art, and other areas that made links between schools in the two sectors and contributed to raising standards. What is significant about this scheme is not the relatively small amounts of funding made available but the major change in policy that it represented and the ideological support it gives to the private sector. The unspoken assumption behind the scheme was that private schools are “better” than state-maintained schools, and that they should share some of their expertise and facilities with local state-maintained schools. While it is certainly correct that many of the major schools do have far better facilities for sport, science, music and so on, it is not clear that the teachers in such schools are necessarily “better” or that they are ideally suited to “help” children from comprehensive schools who often come from rather different social-class backgrounds than the children they usually teach. The scheme has been extended and continued throughout Labour’s period of government with 330 projects receiving a total of around £10 million over the first nine years.

### *Curriculum Development*

There is very little evidence that the private sector has led the way in terms of curriculum development. In the 1960s teachers from the private sector were highly influential in developing a more exploratory approach to science teaching that became known as

Nuffield sciences. At that time they were also influential writers of school textbooks. But the decline in the grammar schools has meant that publishers look to writers from the comprehensive schools to now lead the way. Private schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum, but do have to provide a „broad and balanced“ curriculum. This means that, theoretically, private schools have more leeway to develop their own teaching methods and curricula. In practice most of the leading secondary schools are highly conservative in both for they are constrained by the nationally set examinations (GCES and A-levels) taken at 16 and 18. Moreover, the “traditional” curriculum and pedagogy are what many parents are looking for in their choice of the private sector. This does not mean, of course, that they shun information and communications technology and other developments. The major schools have invested heavily in ICT and other teaching facilities, but they are mainly major consumers rather than actually leading developments.

During the last decade or more there has been an increasing amount of control by central government on the activities of private schools. Some of these are related to child protection and care issues, but others are to ensure that teaching standards are adequate. When the national scheme of school inspection was introduced by the Conservative government, private schools were initially excluded. The Labour government has ensured that all private schools are also regularly inspected, although a set of inspection organisations have been established by the various groups of schools to do so. This is an added cost that is particularly heavily felt by the smaller schools.

As part of this new relationship with the private sector, the Labour government also made it clear that it does not intend to remove charitable status from private schools or impose Value Added Tax. This had been seen as a major threat in the 1992 General Election, as it would have led to significant increases in school fees (Palfreyman 2003). However, Labour has also had a major review of the law on charities. It was once the case that any educational activity was automatically deemed to be charitable, but changes made in the Charities Act 2006 have meant that private schools now have to prove that they are engaged in charitable activities. It is now necessary for schools to provide benefits to people other than the children of those who pay fees. This can be done through a variety of ways. One common way is by offering scholarships to children of those who cannot afford the fees. In 2008, 24 per cent of students in ISC schools received help from their schools with fees. Other ways of meeting the public benefit criterion are allowing non-members of the school to use school facilities or becoming involved with neighbouring state-maintained schools.

## Conclusion

The private sector in England provides schooling for about seven per cent of children, but its significance is far greater than this proportion would indicate. Even though there is little evidence that the leading schools are actually more educationally effective, the belief that this is true is widely held. Indeed, the belief influences government policy to-

wards both private and state-maintained schooling. Further, it has been shown that diversity is a central feature of the sector.

However, all of the private schools face a number of threats to their survival that are related to funding. Within the ISC schools fees have risen by six per cent or more every year since 2000, and the real cost of private schooling has more than doubled in the last twenty years. These major increases are due to the rate of inflation for school costs having risen at a much higher rate than general inflation. But the rise is also due to specific extra costs designed to ensure that the schools remain competitive with the state-maintained sector. Small classes are a very important reason why parents chose private schools (Foskett/Hemsley-Brown 2003), so private schools have about 14 per cent of the nation's teachers educating about seven per cent of the school population. In 2008, teacher/pupil ratios were 9.6 : 1 in ISC schools compared to a ratio of 18.2 : 1 in state-maintained schools. Private schools also have a higher percentage of teachers in "shortage subjects" such as Mathematics and Sciences and have to pay higher salaries to retain them (Green et al. 2008). There has also been heavy investment in physical facilities.

The changes to charity law have meant that all schools that wish to retain charitable status (with its tax advantages) have had to invest in activities which benefit people other than those who pay fees or their children. The most usual form that this has taken is in scholarships which partly or fully support the fees of children from poorer families. This support is not totally altruistic, of course, as selecting highly academically able children should improve the examination performance of the school as a whole and thus enable the school to present itself as more academically successful than it might otherwise be. But it still leads to higher fees for those who do pay the full fees. The current world-wide recession is a major threat to the private schools in England. Put simply, fewer people will be able to afford the fees whether they are paying them from wealth or income. In addition, those schools with foundation income will probably have seen the value of their assets decrease markedly as stock markets have fallen.

This financial crisis has come at a time when investment in state-maintained schooling in England has been at all all-time high (Walford 2008b). The Labour government has made massive investments in new school buildings and in ICT and other facilities. In particular, the buildings of the new Academies are often designed by world-class architects and, even though they may have problems in practice, look extremely attractive. There has been a policy of increasing educational standards throughout the last decade and examination results within the state-maintained sector have increased every year. Coupled with this has been an increase in the degree of choice of school that is available to parents (Walford 2006). The Conservative government gradually introduced greater choice of school during the 1980s, and this has been continued throughout the Labour period of office. The admission processes have been made clearer and more transparent, but it is still possible for more affluent parents to have an advantage in the choice of school for their children.

In short, at a time when private schools are becoming ever more expensive and families are less able to find the fees, state-maintained private schools are becoming more



attractive. There will always be those parents who only consider the private (elite) sector for their children, but this number has always been small. It is reasonable to predict that, as the financial crisis deepens more parents will look first to the state sector and only consider the private sector if they fail to get a place at the state-maintained school of their choice for their children. It seems inevitable that there will be many closures of private schools in England in the next few years.

## NOTE

Statistical data are taken from National Statistics (2008) and ISC (2008). This article draws upon (Walford 2004b).

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**Abstract:** About seven per cent of children in England are educated in private schools, but the significance of the private sector in policy terms is far greater than this proportion would indicate. While schools such as Eton College and Winchester College are still the best-known, these schools form only a small part of the private sector, which is actually characterised by its diversity. The number of private Muslim schools has increased considerably since the 1970s due largely to immigration. Furthermore, individual profit-orientated schools have established themselves in recent years. Despite the diversity within the sector and the lack of evidence, there is a widely held belief that private sector schools are more educationally effective. Indeed, the belief influences government policy towards both private and state-maintained schooling.

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