

Independent schools: What does the public think?

The first of two interim reports by the Commission on the Future for Independent Schools (Civitas)



First published: **February 2024**

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ISBN: 978-1-912581-53-5

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Printed in Great Britain
by 4edge Limited, Essex

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About the Commission

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools

Civitas has been conducting research on a major commission on the future for independent schools in England. We are taking an in-depth look at what the future holds for these schools.

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 involves 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 pleased to have a panel of commissioners with a broad range of expertise in the education sector advising us in this work.

Commissioners

The Commission is formed of: Edward Davies (Policy Director, The Centre for Social Justice); Jodh Dhesi (Chief Executive Officer of the King Edward VI Foundation, Birmingham); John Edward (Head of Operations of the Scottish Council on Global Affairs, former Director of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools); Unity Jones (Director of Insights and Innovation, Academies Enterprise Trust); Barney Northover (Partner at VWV, specialising in strategic and governance advice for schools); Professor Dame Alison Peacock (CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching); and Diana Young (Writer & PR consultant).

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.

Terminology

Private schools are schools that are administered and funded privately of the government. These schools are also known as **independent schools**. The two terms are synonymous according to the government.¹ This publication more often uses 'private schools', as it is more familiar with the public.

These schools are independent of the state in four key ways: they have the freedom to select their intake of pupils; the freedom to select teachers which do not have Qualified Teacher Status; the freedom to set their own curriculum; and financial autonomy, including the freedom to charge fees.

State schools refers to all schools that are state-funded. Many of these, such as free-schools and academies, have other types of independence, but they are not private schools, because they do not have all four of the freedoms listed above. In particular, private schools are the only schools that are free to charge fees in England.

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

Introduction

Independent schools are a significant piece of our national educational infrastructure, teaching 6.5 per cent of school pupils in England,² and one whose role has changed significantly over the centuries during which they have existed.

They are also an emotive topic of discourse, with many often conflicting views on independent schools represented among the public. On the one hand, independent schools are widely perceived as providing an excellent quality of education, and are seen by many as something to aspire to, and a route for upward social mobility. They are also a successful British export, providing a model for education that countries around the world seek to take part in and draw inspiration from. On the other hand, they are seen by many as something that perpetuates and may even have come to symbolise class division and inequality.

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools in England at Civitas is currently undertaking a major programme of research on those schools and their role in England today. We are hoping to contribute to the public discussion by providing a balanced review of independent schools and their role in the education system and in society more widely, as well as a constructive long-term vision for their future.

As part of the Commission's ongoing work in this area, we have commissioned nationally representative polling in order to understand in detail how independent schools are seen by the British public. The results of this polling are outlined in this report.

Methodology

A team of researchers working on the Commission for the Future of Independent Schools at Civitas commissioned Deltapoll to survey a sample of British adults to ask their views on a range of issues related to private schooling. Deltapoll surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,176 adults from 19-22 January 2024.

Responses were segmented by demographic characteristics, including age, location, socioeconomic grading, 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)³

2 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: 16 February 2024).

3 35 respondents (1.6 per cent) were older than 79 and were not grouped into a generation.

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

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).⁴

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).

⁴ National readership survey, *Social Grade*. Available at: <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/> (Accessed: 12 February 2024).

1. Key findings

- Seventy-two per cent of respondents think that it is right for parents to use their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools. This is over seven times as many as the 10 per cent of adults who think that it is 'wrong'.
- Respondents were much more likely to oppose the abolition of private schools than support it. Just 15 per cent of adults agreed that private schools should be abolished, whilst 52 per cent disagreed (27 per cent answering 'tend to disagree' and 25 per cent 'strongly disagree').
- Half (50 per cent) of respondents agreed that the standard of teaching in private schools is higher than in most other schools, whilst just 16 per cent disagreed.
- Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of respondents agreed that the range of extracurricular activities offered in private schools is better than in most other schools, whilst seven per cent disagreed.
- Just seven per cent of respondents disagreed that the quality of facilities in private schools is better than in most other schools, whilst 69 per cent of respondents agreed.
- Sixty-two per cent of respondents agreed that private schools are better at getting students into good universities than most other schools, with just 10 per cent disagreeing.
- Respondents most associated private schools with the word 'exclusive'. They were almost three times as likely to associate private schools with a negative word ('exclusive', 'elitist', 'snobby', 'entitled') as a positive one ('aspirational', 'valuable', 'leading', 'exceptional').
- Thirty-one per cent of respondents consider the biggest divide in education across England to be between children who receive a high level of support from their parents compared to those who receive a low level of support from their parents. A quarter (26 per cent) think that the biggest divide is between schools in more well-off and less well-off areas and just 19 per cent think it is between private schools and state schools.
- 'Giving their children the highest possible standard of education' was viewed as an important reason for parents to send their children to private school among 81 per cent of respondents. This was only behind 'giving their children access to the best available school facilities' among 82 per cent of respondents.
- Almost half (48 per cent) of respondents disagreed that private schools should be exempt from VAT, more than double the 22 per cent that agreed, although an extension of bursaries/scholarship was much more likely to improve perceptions of private schools (48 per cent viewing more favourably) than VAT being charged on school fees (30 per cent viewing more favourably).

2. Polling the general public on private schools

The existence of private schools

The polling asked three questions about the existence of private schools.

‘In principle, do you think it is right or wrong for some schools to exist in England today which have the freedom to diverge from the national curriculum set by the government?’

- **Only a third (33 per cent) of respondents think that it is right for some schools to have the freedom to diverge from the national curriculum set by the government.** This was roughly the same as the proportion who felt it was wrong (35 per cent) and the proportion who responded ‘don’t know’ (32 per cent).
- This result varied widely by age. For those aged 18-24, 43 per cent thought that this freedom to diverge from the national curriculum was ‘right’, whilst just 28 per cent thought that it was ‘wrong’. For those aged 65 or over, just 25 per cent thought that this freedom to diverge from the national curriculum was ‘right’, whilst almost double, 49 per cent, thought that it was ‘wrong’.
- The result also varied by political affiliation. Conservative voters⁵ were much less likely to support the freedom to diverge from the national curriculum, with 31 per cent saying it was ‘right’ and 41 per cent that it was ‘wrong’, whilst Labour voters were more supportive, with 36 per cent saying that it was ‘right’ and 30 per cent that it was wrong.
- These results seem to contrast with most questions about support for private schools by population sub-group. It is possible that older respondents and Conservatives interpret ‘diverging from the national curriculum’ as an abandonment of rigorous or traditional educational standards.

‘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 respondents think that it is right for parents to use their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools.** This is over seven times as many as the 10 per cent of adults who think that it is ‘wrong’.
- Although this result varied a little by age, region and 2019 General Election vote, every group was overwhelmingly supportive of parents using their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools. Figure 3.1 (page 13) shows that even among Labour voters – the group most likely to answer that sending children to private school was ‘wrong’ – almost four times as many respondents answered that it was ‘right’ than ‘wrong’.

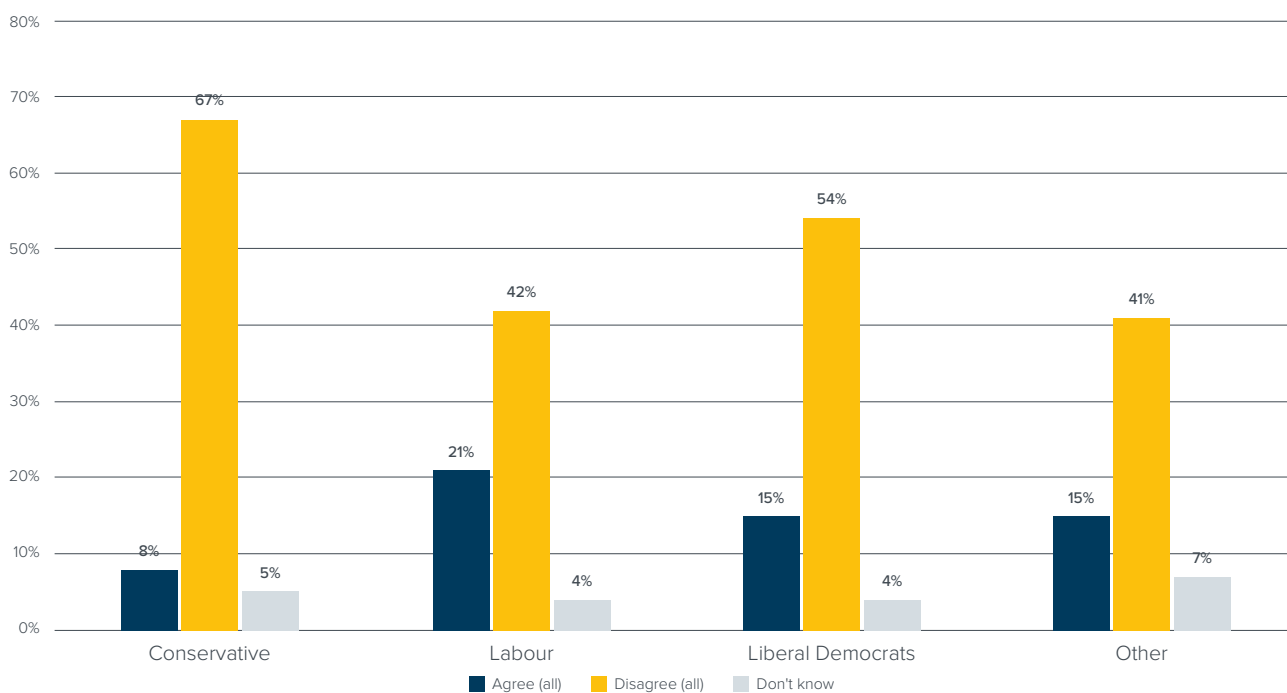
To what extent do you agree or disagree: ‘Private schools in England should be abolished’

- **Only 15 per cent of respondents agreed that private schools should be abolished; over three times as many (52 per cent) disagreed.** A significant proportion, (28 per cent) neither agreed nor disagreed, and six per cent answered ‘don’t know’.
- Twenty-five per cent of respondents answered ‘strongly disagree’; more than four times as many as those who ‘strongly agree’ (six per cent).

⁵ References to ‘Conservative voters’ and similar for other parties throughout this report refer to the 2019 General Election.

- Conservative voters were less likely to favour abolition of private schools (eight per cent agreement) than those who voted for Labour, Liberal Democrats, or other parties (21 per cent, 15 per cent, and 15 per cent respectively). However, all political affiliations showed net opposition to abolition.
- Gen Zs were more than twice as likely as Baby Boomers to favour abolition of private schools (23 per cent versus 11 per cent). However, all generations had a net opposition to abolition. See Figure 3.2 (page 13).

Figure 2.1: To what extent do you agree or disagree: ‘Private schools in England should be abolished’, by 2019 General Election vote



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

Charitable status and taxation

To what extent do you agree or disagree: ‘Private schools in England should be classed as charities’

- Most private schools in England are classified as charities, although many choose not to be. Charities are eligible for some tax exemptions and relief, but must be for the ‘public benefit’ in order to qualify.⁶
- **Respondents were unlikely to think that private schools should be classed as charities.** Eleven per cent of adults agreed whilst 65 per cent disagreed, of whom 40 per cent disagreed strongly.
- The group most likely to agree that private schools should be classed as charities was London, where 19 per cent supported and 57 per cent opposed it.

⁶ Fairbairn, C. et al (2023) *Charitable status and independent schools*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05222/> (Accessed: 5 February 2024).

To what extent do you agree or disagree: 'Private school fees in England should be exempt from Value Added Tax (VAT), charged at 20 per cent'

- Currently, private school fees in England are exempt from VAT. The Labour Party have expressed that they intend to remove this exemption if they win the next General Election in 2024/5.⁷
- Overall, **48 per cent of respondents disagreed that private schools should be exempt from VAT, more than double the 22 per cent that agreed.**
- The geographical area with the greatest support for private schools being exempt from VAT was London, where 29 per cent of respondents agreed and 42 per cent disagreed. By contrast, the lowest agreement of any population sub-group was found in Scotland, where just 10 per cent of respondents agreed whilst 58 per cent disagreed.

To what extent do you agree or disagree: 'Private schools in England should be exempt from taxes that most businesses face, like corporation tax'

- Currently, charitable private schools, like all registered charities, are exempt from corporation tax and business rates, though commercial private schools are not.
- **The majority of respondents (55 per cent) disagreed that private schools should receive charitable tax exemptions.** Just 17 per cent of respondents agreed.
- Again, the geographical area that agreed most with this statement was London, where 23 per cent of respondents agreed that private schools should receive tax exemptions, whilst 45 per cent disagreed. The lowest agreement of any population sub-group was found in Scotland, where just six per cent of respondents agreed whilst 70 per cent disagreed.

How are private schools perceived?

In your opinion, which of the following words, if any, best describe private schools? Please select up to three.

Words in order of most selected:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Exclusive: 46 per cent | 6. Valuable: 14 per cent |
| 2. Elitist: 44 per cent | 7. Leading: 13 per cent |
| 3. Snobby: 34 per cent | 8. Exceptional: 12 per cent |
| 4. Entitled: 33 per cent | 9. Trendy: 3 per cent |
| 5. Aspirational: 15 per cent | 10. None of the above: 3 per cent |

- Respondents were much more likely to consider private schools as exclusive, elitist, snobby or entitled than they were to consider them aspirational, valuable, leading, or exceptional. Almost no respondents consider them to be trendy.
- In total, the four words that could be considered negative were selected roughly three times as often as the four positive words.
- Private schools were viewed slightly more positively in London than in other parts of the country, but still here the negative words were chosen more than one and a half times as often as the positive ones.

⁷ Labour Party (2024) *Let's Get Britain's Future Back*. Available at: <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Missions-Documents-Lets-Get-Britains-Future-Back.pdf> (Accessed: 5 February 2024).

For each of the following statements, please say whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with 14 statements about the provision of education in private schools compared with other schools.

1. The standard of teaching in private schools is higher than in most other schools

- Half (50 per cent) of respondents agreed that the standard of teaching in private schools is higher than in most other schools, whilst just 16 per cent disagreed.
- Every population sub-group had strong net agreement with this statement. The lowest agreement with this statement was from respondents in Scotland, where 39 per cent agreed and 16 per cent disagreed. By contrast, in London 58 per cent agreed and 14 per cent disagreed.

2. The quality of facilities in private schools is better than in most other schools

- Sixty-nine per cent of respondents agreed that the quality of facilities in private schools is better than in most other schools, and just seven per cent disagreed.
- Although there was some variation across different groups, there was overwhelming agreement that private schools have better quality facilities than in most other schools across all groups. The lowest agreement with this statement was in Millennials, in Scotland, and in those who voted 'other' in the General Election (59 per cent agreement in all groups).

3. The range of extracurricular activities offered in private schools is better than in most other schools

- Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of respondents agreed that the range of extracurricular activities offered in private schools is better than in most other schools, whilst seven per cent disagreed.
- Every population sub-group had strong net agreement with this statement. The group with the lowest agreement was the North, with 54 per cent agreeing and 10 per cent disagreeing. By contrast, in London 68 per cent agreed and 12 per cent disagreed.

4. The range of subjects offered in private schools is much better than in most other schools

- Just under half (48 per cent) of respondents agreed that the range of subjects offered in private schools is much better than in most other schools, whilst 13 per cent disagreed.
- Every population sub-group had strong net agreement with this statement. The smallest agreement was in respondents in Scotland, where 36 per cent agreed and 15 per cent disagreed. By contrast, in London 55 per cent agreed and 15 per cent disagreed.

5. Private schools offer better career guidance than most other schools

- Forty-five per cent of respondents agreed that private schools offer better career guidance than most other schools, over three times as many as those that disagreed (13 per cent).
- The smallest agreement with this statement was again in Scotland, where 28 per cent agreed and 16 per cent disagreed. London had by far the largest agreement; there, 64 per cent agreed and 12 per cent disagreed.

6. Private schools are better at getting students into good universities than most other schools

- Sixty-two per cent of respondents agreed that private schools are better at getting students into good universities than most other schools, with just 10 per cent disagreeing.
- This result was fairly consistent across population sub-groups. Over half of respondents in every group agreed, and no group had more than 14 per cent disagreement.

7. Private schools do a better job than most other schools of preventing bullying

- This was one of only two of the 14 statements where more respondents disagreed with the statement than agreed. **Only 20 per cent agreed that private schools do a better job than most other schools of preventing bullying, whilst 33 per cent disagreed.**
- A third neither agreed nor disagreed (32 per cent) and a further 15 per cent answered ‘don’t know’.
- Disagreement with this statement does not necessarily mean that respondents think private schools are worse at preventing bullying than most other schools – just that they are not better at prevention.

8. Private schools are better at supporting students who are struggling with their academic work

- **Thirty-nine per cent of respondents felt that private schools are better at supporting students who are struggling with their academic work, compared to 17 per cent who disagreed.**
- Of all subgroups, respondents in London were the most likely to agree (58 per cent), and those in Scotland were the least likely to agree (27 per cent).

9. Private schools are better at supporting especially gifted students with their academic work

- The statement that private schools are better at supporting especially gifted students received more agreement than the statement that private schools are better at supporting those struggling academically.
- **Fifty-eight per cent agreed that private schools are better at academically supporting especially gifted students, compared with just 10 per cent who disagreed.** This was reasonably consistent across age, region and 2019 General Election vote.

10. Students who attend private schools are more likely to develop a love of learning than students who attend most other schools

- **More respondents (34 per cent) answered ‘neither agree nor disagree’ to this question than agreed (32 per cent) or disagreed (24 per cent).** Just eight per cent ‘strongly agreed’ and just eight per cent ‘strongly disagreed’.
- This represented a consistent theme that respondents were much more likely to neither agree nor disagree with statements relating to the students who attend the schools, compared to questions about the schools themselves.

11. Students who attend private schools grow up to be more confident than students who attend most other schools

- **Forty per cent of respondents agreed that students who attend private schools grow up to be more confident than students who attend most other schools, more than twice as many as those who disagreed (18 per cent).** Thirty-two per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

12. Students who attend private schools are more likely to make good friends

- **Twenty-two per cent of respondents agreed that students who attend private schools are more likely to make good friends, whilst 29 per cent disagreed.** However, both of these were lower than the 39 per cent who neither agreed nor disagreed.
- This was the second area, alongside that of being better at preventing bullying, where more respondents disagreed with the statement than agreed with it.
- London (38 per cent agree, 28 per cent disagree) and the Midlands (24 per cent agree, 21 per cent disagree) were the only groups more likely to agree than disagree with the statement.
- Disagreeing with the statement does not mean that respondents felt that students who attend private schools are less likely to make good friends, just that they did not agree that they were *more* likely to make good friends.

13. Teachers are better at maintaining discipline in private schools than in most other schools

- Forty-two per cent of respondents agreed that teachers are better at maintaining discipline in private schools than in most other schools, compared to 17 per cent who disagreed.
- Again, the group most likely to agree with this statement was respondents in London (56 per cent agree, 20 per cent disagree). The group least likely to agree was respondents who voted for parties other than the Conservatives, Labour, or the Liberal Democrats in 2019 (29 per cent agree, 18 per cent disagree).

14. Private schools have a stronger sense of community than most other schools

- Answers were fairly evenly spread to this question. **Slightly more respondents agreed (29 per cent) with this statement than disagreed with it (26 per cent) but respondents were most likely to neither agree nor disagree (32 per cent).**
- Some sub-groups had a net disagreement with this statement: those aged 35-54 and 55-64; Gen X; Labour voters and 'other' voters; Scotland, Wales, and the North.
- However, no sub-group had a net agreement or net disagreement greater than 13 per cent.

Taking everything into account, if you had to say, what do you think is the biggest divide in education across England?

- **Thirty-one per cent of respondents consider the biggest divide in education across England to be between children who receive a high level of support from their parents and children who receive a low level of support from their parents.** A quarter (26 per cent) think that the biggest divide is between schools in more well-off and less well-off areas and just 19 per cent think it is between private schools and state schools.
- Just 10 per cent of respondents considered the divide between a few elite private schools and all other schools to be the biggest divide in education across England.

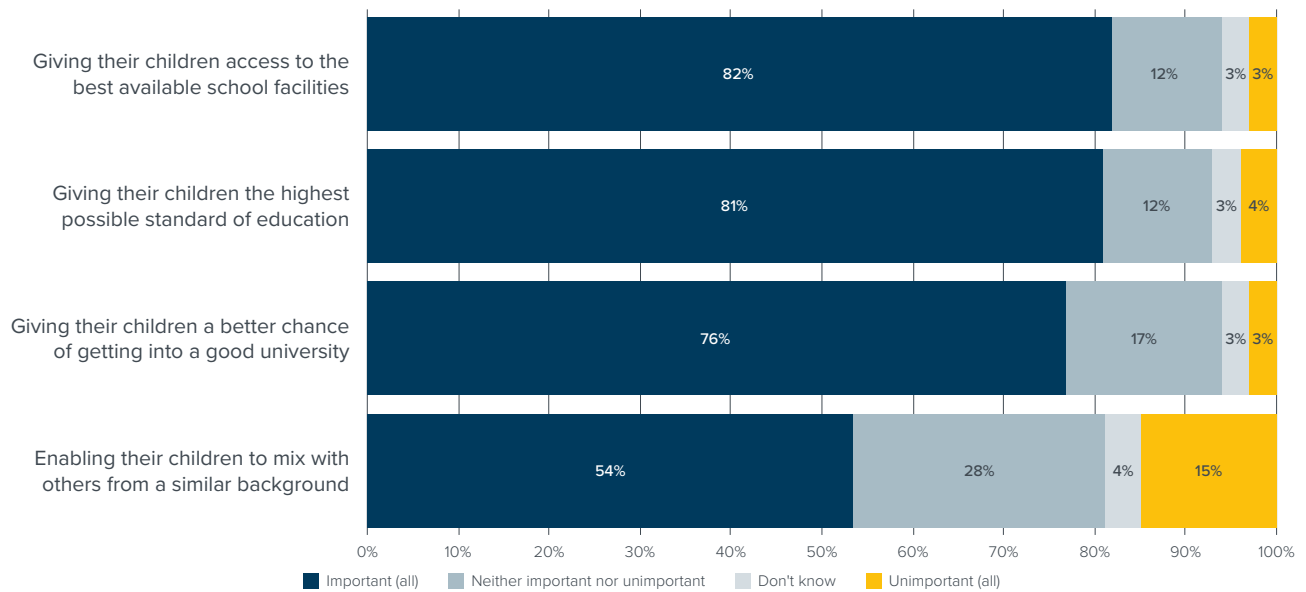
Why do parents choose private schooling?

The following question explores the public perception of parents who send their children to private schools.

Thinking about each of the following reasons why parents might choose to send their children to private school, how important or unimportant are each of the following?

- 'Giving their children the highest possible standard of education' was viewed as an important reason parents send their children to private school by 81 per cent of respondents. This was only behind 'giving their children access to the best available school facilities', with 82 per cent of respondents. Most other respondents considered it 'neither important nor unimportant'.
- The only reason that respondents were much less likely to perceive as important to parents was that of 'enabling their children to mix with others from a similar background.' Although the majority (54 per cent) did perceive this as important, it was almost five times as likely as the other options to be considered unimportant.

Figure 2.2: ‘Thinking about each of the following reasons why parents might choose to send their children to private school, how important or unimportant are each of the following?’



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

Policy perspectives

The poll asked respondents whether a selection of commonly discussed policy proposals would leave their attitudes towards private schools more or less favourable than they currently are. This is not the same as whether respondents endorsed the suggestions, but gives insight into the likely impact of these policies on perceptions of private schools.

Would you take a more or less favourable attitude towards private schools in England, or would your attitude stay the same, if each of the following were to happen?

Private schools offer more bursaries/scholarships to children who otherwise could not afford to attend

- Almost half (48 per cent) of respondents would take a more favourable attitude towards private schools if they offered more bursaries or scholarships to children who otherwise could not afford to attend. A very small five per cent would take a less favourable attitude, and 31 per cent said that their attitude would stay the same.
- Of the four policy proposals, this one had the most respondents indicating that it would make their view of private schools more favourable.

Private schools are made to pay the same taxes as businesses

- Over a third (35 per cent) of respondents said their attitude towards private schools would be more favourable if they were made to pay the same taxes as businesses. Although significant, this proportion was smaller than the 41 per cent whose attitudes would stay the same. Just seven per cent said their attitude would become less favourable.

Value Added Tax (VAT) is charged on private school fees at a rate of 20 per cent

- **Thirty per cent of respondents said they would view private schools more favourably if VAT was charged on fees.** A larger group (40 per cent) said their attitude would stay the same, and 10 per cent said their attitudes would become less favourable.
- This policy had the smallest impact, but still had a significant net positive impact on favourability of attitudes to private schools. Three times as many respondents said it would make them view private schools more positively than those who said the opposite.

The government invests significantly more money in state schools

- **Forty-one per cent of respondents indicated that their attitude towards private schools would become more favourable if state schools received significant additional government investment.** Seven per cent said their attitude would become less favourable, and 37 per cent said their attitude would stay the same.
- It is notable that a government policy that would not directly affect private schools appears to have a larger impact on the favourability of perceptions of private schools than VAT being charged on private school fees.

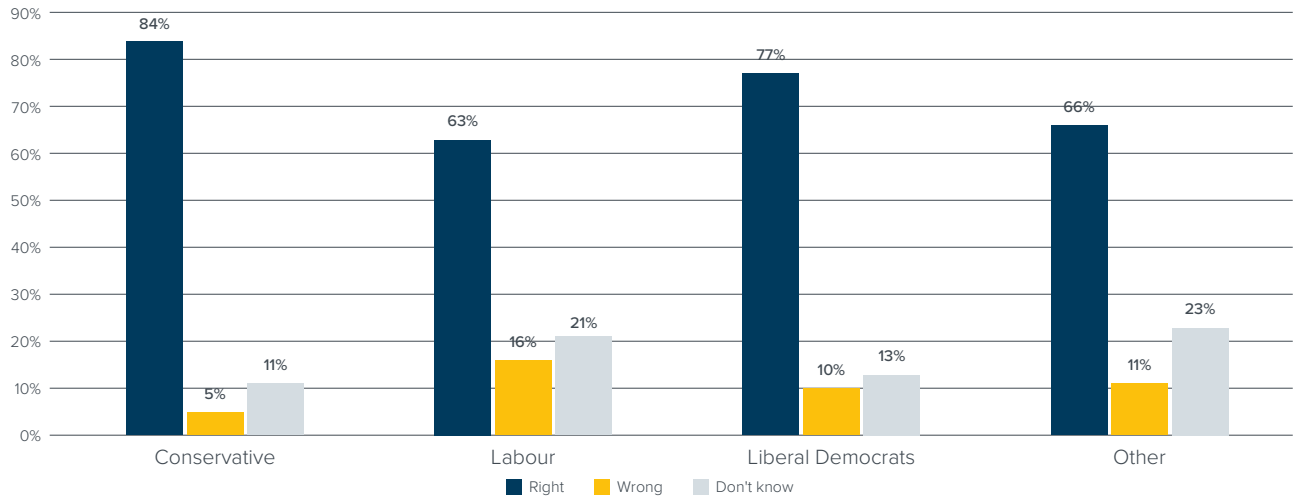
3. Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from these polling results, summarised below.

1. Respondents overwhelmingly supported the right of parents to choose private schools, and opposed the abolition of private schools

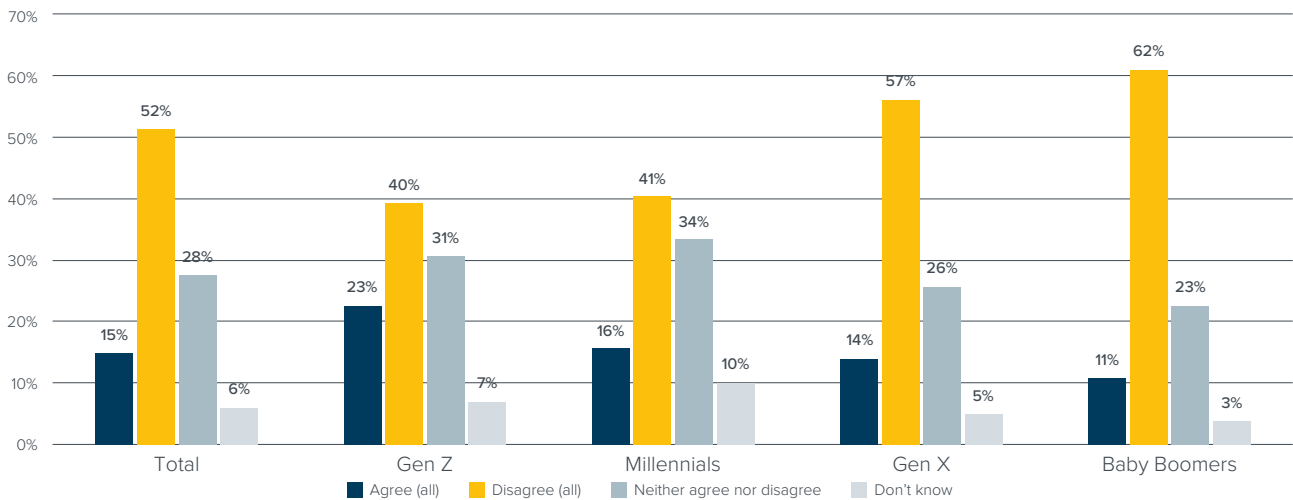
- Most respondents (72 per cent) thought it right for parents to spend money to give their children the best start in life, including by sending them to private schools. Strong net agreement was seen in every population sub-group. The group with the most disagreement was Labour voters, who still had a net approval of +47 per cent (see Figure 3.1).
- Most respondents (52 per cent) opposed the abolition of private schools. Net disagreement with the statement ‘private schools should be abolished’ was seen in every population sub-group. The smallest net disagreement was seen in younger respondents (Gen Z, -17 per cent; compared to Baby Boomers, -51 per cent).

Figure 3.1: ‘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?’, by 2019 General Election vote



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

Figure 3.2: To what extent do you agree or disagree: ‘Private schools in England should be abolished’, by generation

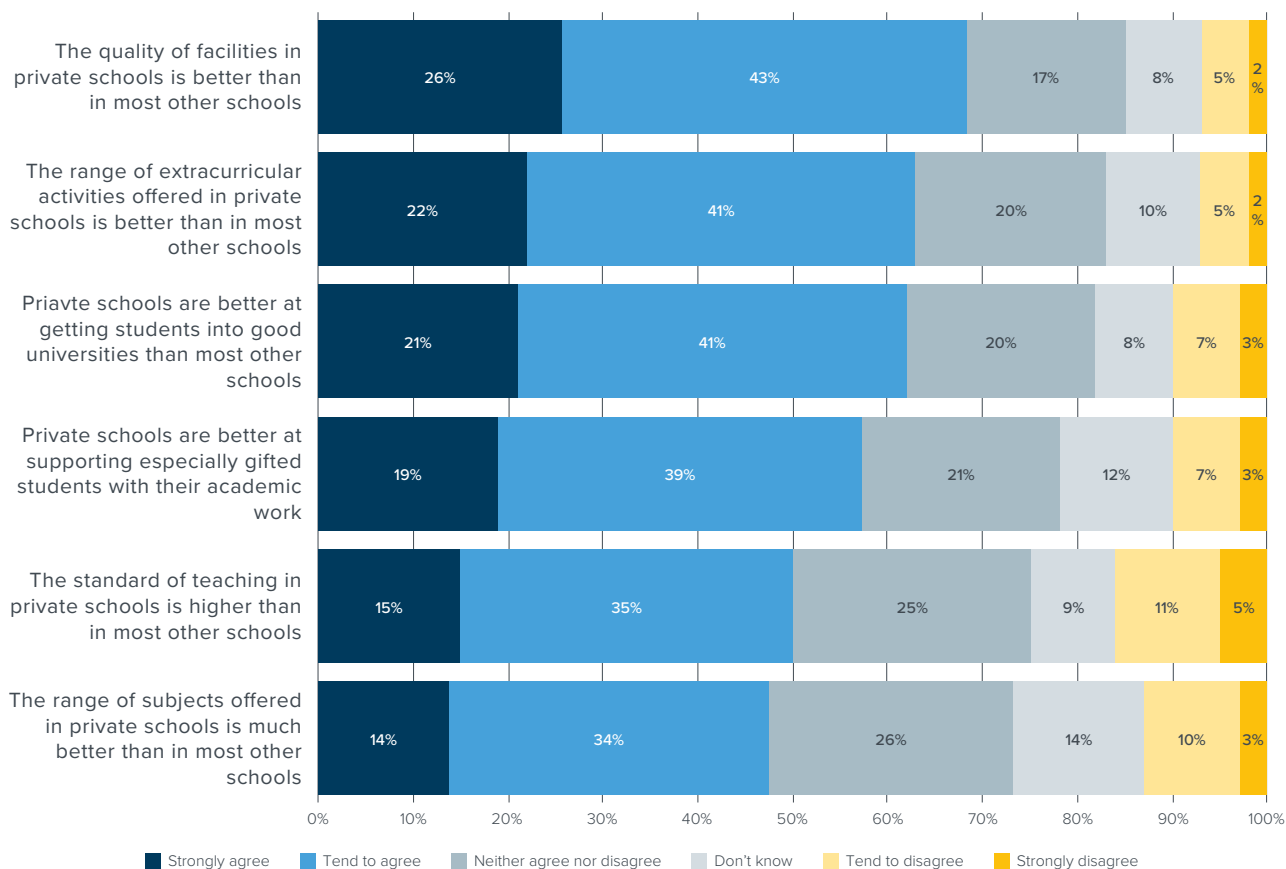


Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

2. Respondents view private schools as good schools

- Respondents considered private schools to offer better facilities, teaching, discipline, advice, opportunities, nurturing (of confidence and a love of learning) and breadth than most other schools.
- Of all the benefits suggested, respondents were most likely to consider the facilities, extracurricular offering and university application support to be better at private schools.

Figure 3.3: ‘For each of the following statements, please say whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree’, selected questions.

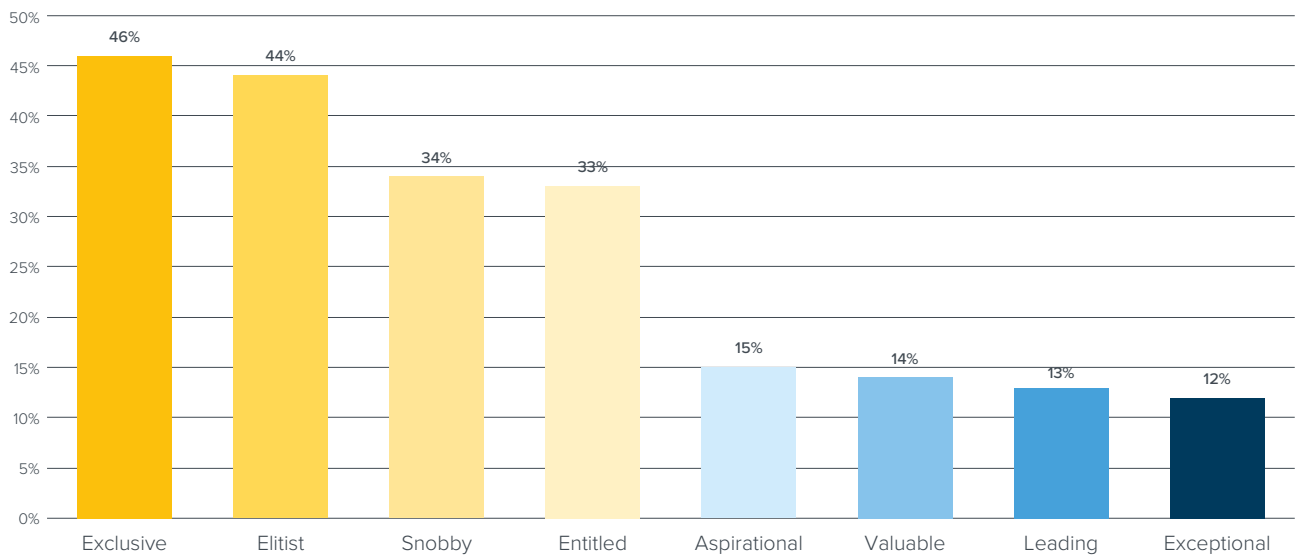


Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

3. Negative sentiment towards private schools is very common

- Respondents were more likely to associate private schools with a negative word (‘exclusive’, ‘elitist’, ‘snobby’, ‘entitled’) than a positive one (‘aspirational’, ‘valuable’, ‘leading’, ‘exceptional’).
- This was the case for every population sub-group, although positive sentiment was more common in London, where respondents selected negative words roughly one and a half times as often as positive ones, than in the population as a whole, where respondents selected negative words roughly three times as often as positive ones.

Figure 3.4: 'In your opinion, which of the following words, if any, best describe private schools? Please select up to three.'

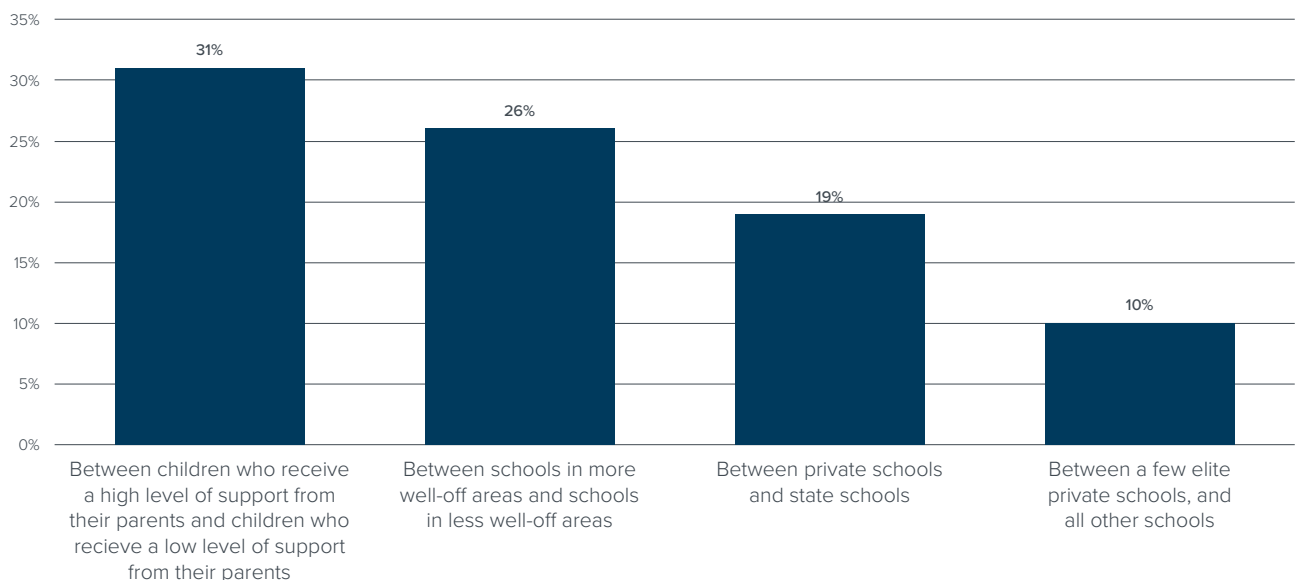


Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024. Note: 'trendy' has been removed from this graph as it was extremely uncommon in responses.

4. Respondents do not consider the divide between private schools and state schools to be the biggest divide in education in this country

- Thirty-one per cent of respondents consider the biggest divide in education across England to be between children who receive a high level of support from their parents and those who receive a low level of support from their parents. Comparatively, just 19 per cent think the biggest divide is between private schools and state schools.

Figure 3.5: 'Taking everything into account, if you had to say, what do you think is the biggest divide in education across England?'

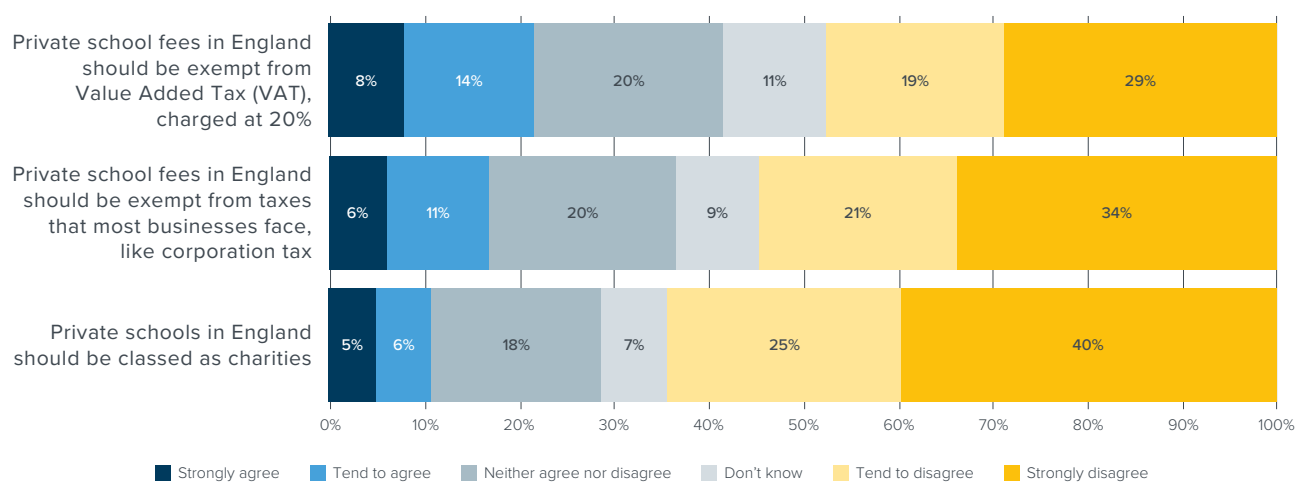


Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

5. The public do not view private schools as meriting charitable status, business tax exemptions, or VAT exemptions

- Twenty-two per cent of respondents said private schools should be exempt from VAT, while more than twice as many (48 per cent) said they should not be.
- Seventeen per cent of respondents said private schools should be exempt from business taxes, while more than three times as many (55 per cent) said they should not be.
- The public were especially unlikely to think that private schools should be classed as charities. Only 11 per cent said that they should be, while nearly six times as many (65 per cent) said they should not be.
- For all three of these questions, strong net disagreement was seen in every population subgroup (except for respondents aged 25-34, who had a +1 per cent net agreement that private schools should be exempt from VAT).

Figure 3.6: ‘For each of the following statements about private schools, please say whether you agree, disagree, or neither agree nor disagree.’

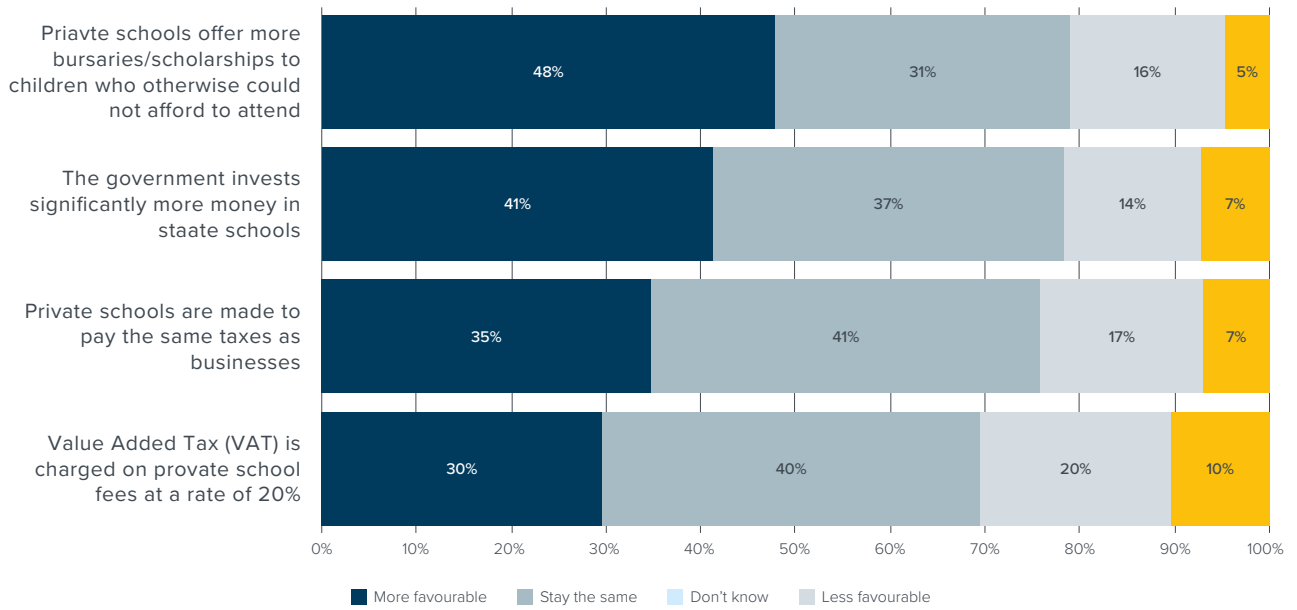


Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

6. In line with these observations – of a right to exist and an impressive offering, but an ‘exclusive’ and non-charitable one – respondents were most likely to view private schools more favourably if they spread their provision by offering more bursaries.

- This suggestion was more popular than those of additional government investment in state schools or additional taxes on private schools.
- This is not a surprising result: the public were clear that their issue with the sector is not whether parents should spend their money on them nor whether they are good quality but that they are ‘exclusive’ and ‘elitist’.

Figure 3.7: 'Would you take a more or less favourable attitude towards private schools in England, or would your attitude stay the same, if each of the following were to happen?'



Source: Civitas/Deltapoll poll of 2,176 British adults, 19-22 January 2024.

4. Conclusion

The results of this polling reveal that there is strong public support for the right of independent schools to exist, and the right of parents to choose an independent education for their children if they can afford to do so. These schools are widely perceived to offer a better educational experience than state schools, with the public believing that independent schools provide better teaching, facilities, and support to pupils.

However, independent schools are not viewed wholly positively. The public overwhelmingly does not believe that independent schools merit charitable status or tax exemptions, and most often associate them with the words 'elitist' and 'exclusive'. These sentiments are much more often associated with independent schools than more positive ones (such as 'aspirational' or 'valuable').

According to our polling, the policy that would have the most impact on how favourably independent schools were viewed was if more children were enabled to attend them via bursaries and scholarships. This would have more of an impact than removing tax exemptions for independent schools, or investing more in state schools.

All in all, these results suggest a mixed public attitude towards independent schools. Respondents support the principle of independent education. However, there is a keen sense that the benefits of independent education could be more widely distributed.

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In this interim report by the Commission on the Future for Independent Schools (Civitas), researchers commissioned the polling agency Deltapoll to survey a sample of British adults to ask their views on a range of issues related to private schooling. Deltapoll surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,176 respondents from 19-22 January 2024.

Its key findings include:

- Seventy-two per cent of respondents think that it is right for parents to use their money to give their children the best possible start in life, including by sending them to private schools. This is over seven times as many as the 10 per cent of adults who think that it is 'wrong'.
- Respondents were much more likely to oppose the abolition of private schools than support it. Just 15 per cent of adults agreed that private schools should be abolished, whilst 52 per cent disagreed.
- Half (50 per cent) of respondents agreed that the standard of teaching in private schools is higher than in most other schools, whilst just 16 per cent disagreed.
- Nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of respondents agreed that the range of extracurricular activities offered in private schools is better than in most other schools, whilst seven per cent disagreed.
- Sixty-two per cent of respondents agreed that private schools are better at getting students into good universities than most other schools, with just 10 per cent disagreeing.
- Thirty-one per cent of respondents consider the biggest divide in education across England to be between children who receive a high level of support from their parents compared to those who receive a low level of support from their parents. A quarter (26 per cent) think that the biggest divide is between schools in more well-off and less well-off areas and just 19 per cent think it is between private schools and state schools.
- 'Giving their children the highest possible standard of education' was viewed as an important reason for parents to send their children to private school among 81 per cent of respondents.

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978-1-912581-53-5