

The Commission on the Future for Independent Schools

SUMMARY

A full online version of the report is now available at: www.civitas.org.uk

This summary is prepared for an event to discuss the report.

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.

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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 2024/25.¹ 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.² 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.

¹ UK Government (2024) *School funding statistics*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-funding-statistics> (Accessed: 16 October 2024).

² 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.

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.

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