

[Why private schools have a moral duty not to support government schools](#) [1]

Type: [Think Pieces](#)^[2] Written by **James Stanfield** | Wednesday 7 December 2011



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According to Anthony Seldon, head of Wellington College, Berkshire, fee-paying [private schools have a ?moral duty? to help run failing government schools](#) ^[3] in deprived areas. However private schools are right to question the wisdom of this approach.

First, it is important to remember that the government initially intervened in education in the late 19th century to help support the growth and development of education in deprived areas. However, instead of subsidizing parents and allowing them to choose between a variety of different schools, previous governments directed all public subsidies towards its own free schools, whilst neglecting and ignoring all private alternatives. This subsequently forced the closure of thousands of private and voluntary schools leaving only a small number of private schools to cater for families on a higher income.

As a result, instead of focusing on the development of education in deprived areas, the government soon found itself attempting to manage and control the vast majority of schools serving both rich and poor alike. Unfortunately, any system of education which restricts the freedom of parents to choose will hit those on low incomes the hardest. While better off families can either move to the suburbs in search of a better school or purchase private tuition, those on low incomes who live in deprived areas are forced to accept their local government school, irrespective of how it performs. Government intervention has therefore had the opposite effect from the one that was originally intended.

However, after forcing the vast majority of private and voluntary schools out of business and after creating a system of education which restricts parents? right to choose and penalises those families living in deprived areas, the government now attempts to blame the remaining private schools for all of the problems which they themselves have just created. And to put things right the guilty private schools must now give a helping hand to the failing government schools which they have helped to create. However, let?s be clear - all apartheid, social division and barriers in education are a direct result of the way in which all previous governments have directed public funds to government schools only, thereby denying parents their fundamental right to choose and eventually crowding out the majority of private alternatives.

Second, to suggest that Eton can help to transform a failing inner city comprehensive government school is to completely misunderstand the nature of the problem. First, I suspect that the knowledge and experience

required to educate children who live in deprived areas is slightly different from the knowledge and experience required to educate children who attend Eton. Therefore as Eton will have very little if any knowledge or experience of educating children who live in deprived areas, it is difficult to see what they can bring to the table. Second, all failing (or coasting) government schools located in deprived areas exist because of the way in which all previous governments have directed public funds to government schools only, thereby denying parents their fundamental right to choose and eventually crowding out the majority of private alternatives. It should therefore be blatantly obvious that the only way to solve this problem is for the government to change the way they fund education by creating a level playing field, giving all schools an equal opportunity and by directing all public funds to parents.

Third, by lending their support to failing government schools, private schools will help to prolong the life of a stagnant and immoral government system, which restricts the fundamental right of parents to choose and restricts the freedom of a variety of different organisations to invest and compete in the delivery of children's schooling. Private schools therefore have a moral duty not to support failing government schools.

Fourth, during the period in which the government proceeded to distort, disrupt and completely undermine the natural growth and development of education in the UK, the private schools that survived have simply gone about their business, doing what they do best, which is providing a unique educational experience to those parents who can afford to purchase it. Therefore to accuse these schools of perpetuating social division, suggests that freedom in education will make those who receive this education better off, only at the expense of those who don't receive it who will end up worse off. However, one of the key reasons to justify government subsidies in education is because education has some public good qualities, in that the education received by some children will not only benefit these particular children but will also benefit the wider public, who can enjoy the benefits of living in a more educated and civilised society. The better education that one child receives can therefore only be a good thing for the child concerned and for the rest of society.

That said, if Wellington College want to help transform a failing government school then as a private and independent organisation, they are perfectly free to do so. However, attempting to claim the moral high ground by undertaking such an act is a different matter altogether and one that fails to take into account the reason why these schools are failing in the first place and the desperate need for the government to change the way it subsidises and intervenes in education. Therefore, if private schools want to help improve education in deprived areas, they could do much more good by lobbying the government and promoting a change in policy.

In the meantime, if some government schools want to benefit from receiving a service from a local private school then they should be prepared to pay for it. In education, as elsewhere, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

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