

Private concerns

The UK is among the highest spenders on private education at secondary level. Almost a quarter of all public and private spending combined is channelled privately. Danny Dorling queries Britain's investment in independent schools

A couple of years ago, there was only one OECD country that spent a higher proportion of its education monies in this way: Chile. Chile is not often listed as a country whose education system one might choose to emulate. But Chile is a very economically unequal country, and so is the UK. In the UK, the best-off 10 per cent take roughly 40 per cent of all income.

In the US, the best-off 10 per cent take home even more of the national income each year than in the UK, but spending on independent schools is lower. This is partly because students are more segregated by school board. Live in an expensive school board area, where housing is not easy to come by, and the tax take is higher, so the spending on the local comprehensive school is higher.

High impact

The impact of such high spending, mostly on just 7 per cent of children who are independently schooled, may have a series of effects that are not beneficial. For example, in many OECD countries, higher spending is concentrated on those children who start off furthest behind, not on those who appear to start off more advanced.

I do not lay the blame at independent schools for this, but on the fact that Britain is so much more economically unequal than most other affluent nations. The best-off 1 per cent in the Netherlands and Switzerland are paid less than half that of the best-off 1 per cent in Britain are paid.

The few

Concentrating just 75 per cent of spending mostly on the 93 per cent of children who do not opt out of the state system reduces spending on those children to the level that a country with just 75 per cent of the GDP of the UK might be able to afford. It is often suggested that the elite in Britain might be more interested in the state education system if, like the elites in Germany and France, they tended to use it for their children. I doubt spending per child would be lower overall in that case. Almost all the extra spending on private education is concentrated on just a few children who live mostly in the south-east and south-west of England.

One effect of the concentration of independent schools in the south is that often the results for state schools in otherwise affluent southern cities are well below what might be expected in terms of the number of children later attending university. More children have been getting to university from Sheffield than from Bristol recently. Children from state schools in Oxford get to university at the same rate as children in poor northern cities which don't have one university, let alone two.

Too much?

I think many of the British spend so much on private education partly out of a fear of the alternative. That same fear can explain why house prices in some of the most expensive areas of cities have reached such heights. The prime determinant of house prices is location. And the key aspect of location is that it is far away from poor areas.

High levels of economic inequality can be economically inefficient. Huge amounts of monies are spent on just a few children. Within the seven per cent who attend independent schools, more is spent on the two per cent in the most expensive of those schools than on the other five per cent combined. Is that in the best interests even of these children?

Danny Dorling is a professor at Sheffield University. He writes here in a personal capacity.