

Rich lap up the cream of Britain's top state schools

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The start of this year saw waves made across the penthouse suites and country clubs of Britain, when the January 3 edition of the lifestyle magazine *Tatler* included a list of 30 top state schools in addition to its usual exclusively private school rankings. The magazine specialises in the affairs of the upper classes, who eagerly anticipate the annual publication of its “Black Book” of noteworthy and eligible spouses.

The January 3 edition was, for some, a cause to celebrate the state's newly won worthiness to educate their children. *Tatler* saw its action as a response to the woes of those families for whom the private education of their children is becoming something of a financial strain.

Perhaps the writers are correct in their identification of the troubles of the more junior-ranking bankers, executives, consultants, etc. We shall leave them in *Tatler*'s capable hands. But as for the suggestion that all of this is an endorsement of the state system, cynicism has matured into farce. The inclusion of these top 30 schools represents nothing more noble than directions from the advisers of the wealthy for the purchase and social theft of the best state-funded schooling has to offer.

Under the marketisation and academisation process initiated by the previous Tony Blair/Gordon Brown Labour government, the last vestiges of the limited comprehensive education system established in the 1960s were chiselled away and increased selection introduced.

Having created a cream of state institutions, it was not long before wealth-enabled hands began to skim it. The methods by which the wealthy began monopolising schools, like Robert May's in London's stockbrokers' belt and Holland Park in the capital's West End, centre on the process of selecting pupils depending on a

school's catchment area.

Candidate schoolchildren are assigned priority based on their proximity (often judged through postcodes) to nearby schools—in big cities, the zone around a particular school can be as small as 0.2 miles. The huge significance of this “postcode lottery” was revealed in a 2004 YouGov survey and then again in a Children's Society questionnaire on the same topic in 2007. YouGov found that nearly 60 percent of parents said they would consider moving to get into the catchment area of a good school. The Children's Society's findings were similar.

Confirming that these were not idle wishes, a study by the Sutton Trust published last month showed that 32 percent of professional parents had deliberately moved into an area in order to access better schools.

Partly as a consequence of the inevitable intense competition for these schools, house prices have acquired eye-watering premiums. Research by the Good Schools Guide showed that the average premium for a home near a good state primary school is approaching 40 percent more—and this excludes data from London! A study by Lloyds revealed that houses in the catchment areas of leading state secondary schools are an average of 12 percent more expensive.

Finally, research conducted by the estate agent Savills and the Good Schools Guide reveals that a house near one of London's top 100 schools costs 34 percent more—£173,000 on top of an average £509,000 house.

The overwhelming majority of the population are therefore immediately priced out of these educational hot spots and denied access to the best of the country's state schools. To make matters worse, the rich often do not move into the house near the school they want to send their child to—keeping it empty, buying it as a second home or renting it just for the school period.

Nor is property the only means by which wealthy families ensure advantages for their heirs. Other plans involve the bribing of private psychologists to ascribe children with fake conditions, moving them up the priority ladder for school entrance. On this point, one parent, cited in a *Daily Telegraph* article in 2009, deserves to be quoted in full: “My child’s a bit of a tearaway but with the help of an educational psychologist we’re hoping to transform it into serious ADHD so he can get into...”

Cases of sudden religious conviction including the purchase of false baptism certificates and forging of postcodes are also well known and reported, but with the underlying class discrimination overlooked. A £5,000 fine for submitting a fraudulent address is simply not a risk that can be taken, when such a sum totals a quarter or more of one’s annual income and driving miles to attend church ceremonies every week is a similarly ridiculous financial burden.

These manoeuvres have resulted in Orwellian visits from local vicars to interrogate the gospel knowledge of children applying for faith schools and interrogations by officials from secular schools—more than 1,000 across 91 councils in 2012-2013.

These varied and desperate examples of fraud and theft are further intensified by the growing crisis of school place shortages.

A rationally and democratically planned provision of education is irrelevant, indeed dangerous, to the social groups and their spokesman already profiting from an inherently unequal market-based system.

It is no longer sufficient a barrier to deny working class children the tutoring, materials and free time provided for their “more fortunate” schoolmates. The working class is increasingly barred from any opportunity even to attempt to beat the odds.

What we are witnessing is further ghettoisation of society into zones of educational excellence amid a pool of deprivation. As funding is withdrawn from local authorities under the academy programme, the differences will only be cemented and worsen.

The very existence of wildly differing standards of schooling and the consequent competition for education is a social disgrace. Only by removing the privileges of wealth and effecting a massive redistribution of spending towards education will society be free to form a system offering the basic right of high standards of

schooling to all.



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