Independent schools in Britain employ a disproportionate share of teachers relative to the number of pupils they educate, and the gap between the independent and state sectors has been increasing. What’s more, independent school teachers are more likely than state school teachers to possess postgraduate qualifications, and to be specialists in subjects – such as Maths and Science – where there are shortages of teachers.

These are among the findings of a new study by Professors Francis Green and Stephen Machin and colleagues. In a related study, they find that not only do independent school pupils enjoy facilities that are usually far better than those available in state schools, but these pupils also benefit through improved pay later in life. These financial returns are broadly comparable to the returns on other capital.

There is surprisingly little research on the impact of independent schools on the economy in general and the education sector in particular. In the first of these two studies, the researchers analyse the role of independent schools in the teachers’ labour market, notably their impact on the supply of teachers to the state sector. They find that:

- As higher skills have become more important for economic success in modern societies, there has been a significant rise in the demand for education. In Britain, demand has particularly increased among wealthier families, many of whom choose independent, fee-paying schools. The consequence has been a rising demand for teachers to staff the independent schools.

- Independent schools more than doubled their fees in real terms over the two decades following the 1980s, and used the increased resources to lower the pupil-teacher ratio and to invest in facilities. Given that pupil-teacher ratios in state schools changed little over this time, the independent schools increased their share of the stock of teachers to approximately 14% by 2004, while still educating less than 8% of the nations’ pupils.

- Along with taking a disproportionate and increasing share of teachers, independent schools also employ, on average, somewhat better qualified teachers (as measured by the possession of postgraduate qualifications), and are able to recruit a significantly greater share of shortage-subject teachers than can the state sector.

- The flows into the independent sector of both newly qualified and experienced teachers, the latter trained at the state’s expense, constitute a small though increasing deduction from the supply of new teachers available to state schools.

- Independent school teachers work with fewer pupils and enjoy longer holidays and, in the case of women, shorter weekly hours. The level of job satisfaction over hours and the work itself was higher in independent schools in the early to mid-1990s, but there is evidence of some convergence in job satisfaction since then.

- During the 1990s, women teachers received a pay penalty for working in the independent sector – this was likely to be a ‘compensating differential’ for the experience of better working conditions. For men, there is no significant difference in pay. But for both men and women there is evidence of a substantial pay premium for independent school teachers trained in shortage subjects.

The researchers conclude that the increased resources flowing to independent schools have undoubtedly raised the quality of the education they provide. In their second study, they find that:
On average those paying for private education in the 1970s and beyond were getting good value for their money. Not only have independent school pupils enjoyed facilities normally far better than those available in state schools, but these pupils have also benefited through improved pay later in life. Around the average, the benefits were greater for some than for others, but the fees also varied.

It is also apparent that the chief means of delivering the labour market return is through the better academic qualifications that are delivered by independent schools using their rising resources.

If academic achievements are, therefore, to be a target for government policy, emulation of the independent schools would appear to be a policy worth considering. Nevertheless the exclusiveness of the independent schools is shown by the fact that the sector has not expanded beyond its roughly 8% of the total pupil base for many decades.

Co-author of the research, Professor Francis Green comments:

‘Our findings imply that the rising importance of independent schools needs to be given more serious attention by educational policy-makers – not just as a model for the improvement of state schools but as a significant player in the market for scarce teaching resources.’

‘Continuing shortages in Maths and Science departments are of particular concern, and here the impact of the independent sector appears even stronger.’

Professor Stephen Machin adds:

‘Our findings imply that many others could have benefited from the boost given by the resources available in private schooling, but did not do so.’

‘Since selection into the schools – despite some bursaries and the Assisted Places Scheme – is primarily based on families’ ability to pay, and given the substantial returns achieved, it is hard to escape the conclusion that private schools have served to reproduce inequalities in British society.’

ENDS


Francis Green is professor of economics at the University of Kent. Stephen Machin is research director of the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) is professor of economics at University College London. Richard Murphy is at CEP. Yu Zhu is at the University of Kent.

For further information: contact Francis Green on 01227-761854 or 01227-827305 (email: g.f.green@kent.ac.uk); Stephen Machin on 020-7955-7443 or 020-7504-5870 (email: s.machin@ucl.ac.uk); Jo Cantlay on 020 7955 7285 (email: J.M.Cantlay@lse.ac.uk); or Helen Durrant on 020 7955 7395 (email: h.durrant@lse.ac.uk).