

Low fee private schools

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”

Nelson Mandela

“Privatisation cripples the notion of education as a universal human right and – by aggravating marginalisation and exclusion – runs counter to the fundamental principles of human rights law”

Kishore Singh, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, April 2015

Quality, free, publically provided education is the most efficient and effective way to raise educational standards, improve access and reduce inequality. It ensures that education is provided for the public good, is democratic and accountable, and teachers and support staff are well trained and supported.

Despite this, in recent years, profit making schools have expanded rapidly in the global south as private corporations have recognised the significant profits that can be made from education. Multinational education corporations now operate chains of „low fee“ private schools in Africa and Asia, exposing the education of millions of children to serious risks.

Low fee private schools charge parents a regular weekly or daily fee. Research shows they are able to keep costs low and generate a return for investors by operating at scale, using low cost materials, large numbers of children to a class, and hiring unqualified or under qualified staff on extremely low wages and short term contracts.

In some cases low fee private schools are supported by domestic governments desperate for a quick fix for decades of underinvestment in education. Aid agencies such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) are also spending an increasing proportion of the development budget on low fee schools and other models of private education as an alternative to free, quality, public education.

The problem with low fee private schools

Evidence shows that school fees are a significant barrier to enrolment and completion of primary school education. In countries where school fees have been abolished, enrolment and retention have increased dramatically. World leaders have even committed to “ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education” by 2030, when they agreed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to end extreme poverty and inequality.

Low fee private schools claim to be affordable to the communities where they are established. However, studies in Kenya, Ghana and Uganda have shown that the poorest households would have spend up to 40% of their income on school fees for one child. This can lead to difficult financial choices on education, healthcare, food or shelter. Low fee private schools become even less affordable for households with more than one child of school age. When families are forced to choose which children they can afford to send to a low fee private school they often prioritise boys, further entrenching gender inequality.

In order to maximise profits low fee private schools often operate a strict payment policy. When a child can't pay their school fees, they are not allowed to attend lessons. This contributes to a high drop-out rate and disrupted studies for many children.

Fees don't reflect the full cost of education in low fee private schools. Additional charges such as uniforms, transport, text books and examination fees often place an additional financial burden on households.

Low fee private schools are far more likely to be marketed at middle income households with children already receiving publically provided education, rather than the poorest households or children who do not attend school. This challenges the argument that low fee schools increase access to education. Many public schools receive per student funding, so lose out when children move to low fee private schools.

Low fee private schools are often established quickly, at low cost. This has led to concerns about the poor quality of some school buildings. In August 2016 the Ugandan Minister of Education and Sports, Janet Museveni, announced to parliament that the government planned to close a chain of 63 low fee private schools "because of the danger from poor hygiene and sanitation". Government reports considered in the subsequent court case raised concerns about the use of "non-professional, non-licensed" teachers and that schools had not been registered or licensed.

In a number of countries where the provision of private education has increased, government funding for education has decreased. In urban areas with significant population growth governments are less likely to build new public schools, relying instead on low fee private schools to fill the gap. Decreased education funding also limits the ability of governments to monitor and regulate private education and ensure it meets national standards.

In March 2016 the government of Liberia announced plans to privatise all primary and pre-primary schools in the country over a period of five years. Following significant opposition the government agreed to a pilot Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL). Despite a lack of independent research, and serious concerns about the programme, the government has decided to expand PSL to 202 schools in the project's second year. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Kishore Singh, has criticised the plans, warning "Public schools and their teachers, and the concept of education as a public good, are under attack"... "Provision of public education of good quality is a core function of the State. Abandoning this to the commercial benefit of a private company constitutes a gross violation of the right to education".

Research shows that many low fee private schools deprioritise teaching quality, often relying on poorly trained staff instead of qualified, registered teachers. A 2014 study of low fee private schools commissioned by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) noted that "much of the evidence reviewed indicates that private school teachers are often less formally qualified, have low salaries and weak job security". In some instances teachers only received a few weeks training to prepare them for their roles.

Many low fee schools have replaced qualified teachers with an individual who reads a highly scripted lesson from an electronic tablet. Technology can also be used to monitor performance and ensure each school is delivering the same lesson at the same time, almost

word for word, providing the internet connection works. This significantly reduces the ability of teachers to differentiate lessons for children of differing abilities and discourages questioning and discussion.

Numerous studies have been conducted comparing the quality of fee private schools with publically provided education. Even government sponsored research has found there is no conclusive evidence that low fee schools perform better. There is however significant evidence that low fee schools increase inequality and drive down educational standards.

A new phenomenon?

The low fee school model of education is often described as new and innovative but it shares many similarities with education in Britain in the 1800s. Schools charged a penny a week in fees, there were often 70-80 pupils in a class, and teachers had very little training and were poorly paid. Despite the low fee, education remained unaffordable for many, girls often got left out and standards were very poor. The UK government abolished the „schools pence“ system in 1891.

UK support for low fee private schools

The UK's Department for International Development is a major advocate and funder of low fee private schools, and has awarded contracts to a number of private education corporations to expand their operations in Asia and Africa.

Some of this funding, including significant investments to support the expansion of a number of companies operating low fee private schools, has been channeled through the CDC Group, DFID's private investment arm. Other DFID contracts have been managed by private sector partners, including the Kenya Essential Education Programme (KEEP), led by Adam Smith International and the Girl's Education Challenge, headed by Price Waterhouse Coopers.

In 2016 the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticised the UK government's investment and promotion of low fee private schools: "The Committee is particularly concerned about the financial support provided by the State party to private actors for low-cost and private education projects in developing countries, which may have contributed to undermining the quality of free public education and created segregation and discrimination among pupils and students."

The UK Parliament's International Development Select Committee has raised also serious concerns about low fee private schools in Africa, highlighting in its July 2016 report on DFID's programme in Nigeria: "We are concerned about the affordability of private schooling for the poorest families, and that reliance on for-profit companies to deliver education is not easily reconciled with DFID's commitment to "leaving no one behind".

DFID's work sometimes appears to be driven more by government ideology, rather than evidence. In 2014 the government's Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) first warned "DFID needs to recognise that the private sector is not a developmental panacea". More recently ICAI stated "DFID lacks evidence on the effectiveness and value for money of working through private schools."

Campaigning for free, quality public education

UNISON is working with sister unions, campaigning organisations and Public Services International to call on governments and the World Bank to end their funding and support for low fee private schools. Instead of supporting private education corporations, DFID should invest in quality free public education as the most effective, sustainable and cost effective way to improve education and tackle poverty and inequality.

Take action

Write to your MP and tell ask them to highlight your concerns about low fee private schools to the government.

Write to the Secretary of State for International Development and ask them to end DFID's support and funding for low fee private schools. You can either use the model letter below or complete a UNISON action card.

Secretary of State for International Development
22 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2EG

Dear Secretary of State,

I am deeply concerned about the UK governments' support for low-fee private schools in the global south. These schools have been shown to contribute to poor standards of education, increased inequality and reduced investment in quality, publically provided education. Many companies have been shown to use unqualified staff, scripted lessons read off tablets and inadequate buildings to reduce costs and maximise profits.

I urge you to end the government's support for this controversial model of private schooling and concentrate instead on the development of quality, publically provided, free education for the world's poorest children.

Yours faithfully,

UNISON

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