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OPINION

We spent £100K on my son's education – I'm not sure it was worth it

Employers are no longer so impressed by the cachet of a privately educated candidate

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Being prepared for state school SATS was one thing, but private school entrance exams are on a different scale

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Private schooling has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, thanks to fees no longer being exempt from VAT.

> *Parents can pay between £5,000 and £82,000 a year to send their children to an independent school, which advocates say gives them access to smaller class sizes, more varied subjects and greater teacher dedication. Meanwhile, critics argue that private schools increase inequality and reinforce class boundaries.*
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> *So is private school really worth it? Parent* ***Kate Morris****, headteacher* ***Dave Benson*** *and former private school pupil* ***Eliot Wilson*** *offer their perspectives.*

We had not planned for our son to go to private school.

He was doing very well at his state primary school and had been selected by his headmaster to attend a debate programme at an independent secondary near us in London. He enjoyed the weekly sessions hugely.

So when, at the start of Year 6, out of the blue, a relative generously offered to help fund secondary school fees, we were thrilled.

We assumed that he would apply for the school where he was debating, which was one of the top co-educational schools in London, and he would thrive there. The only problem was that the highly competitive January entrance exams were three months away.

We soon discovered from friends who paid for private schools how well prepared their children were for the exams. Some had been tutored from the age of seven, and **all had been pushed and pressured by their schools**.

We urgently tried to find a tutor, but most were already booked tutoring other hopefuls. We eventually found a private school teacher who was willing to help him, but we knew it would be a challenge to raise him to the required standard. Being prepared for state school SATS was one thing, but this was on a different scale. He was very good at maths and English, but he had never done verbal and non-verbal reasoning – an integral part of the exams, but like learning a foreign language.

We registered **him for three private schools**. The one where he was debating was our top choice, but we were told only one in nine applicants would get a place there. Our second choice was an excellent boys' school further away (but I really wanted him to continue with a co-educational education), and the third was a lavish co-ed, but not particularly academic.

Our tutor was young and busy, and some weeks was unable to come, which threw me into despair. The sense of urgency and panic pervaded the house.

It was exhausting for my son to tackle the sessions after a school day and to attempt the practice papers for homework. He became more tired and stricken as the weeks went on. He studied hard

through the Christmas holidays, and by the time the January exams came around, he had a sinus infection and could barely breathe through his nose.

I began to read to him before he went to bed, as I had done when he was small, which probably calmed me more than him.

Our hearts broke when we received the letter to say he had not got into the local school he'd debated at, not even invited for an interview. I couldn't bear the fact that he had been judged a failure at age 10. I telephoned admissions to explain that he had been ill when taking the exams. The woman who answered the phone was polite but curt. She must have thought I was desperate, which I was. At this point, after all the tutoring and tense preparation, I just wanted him to be accepted at one of the schools.

The boys' school asked him for an interview and later said he had nearly got a place, but not quite. At that moment, I lost all sense of decorum and literally begged the headteacher to give him a chance, to no avail.

The least academic school offered him a place after an interview, and we had a few weeks to decide whether to accept and pay the hefty deposit. We weren't convinced that an average private school was worth it, but he had worked so hard to prepare, and we thought the small classes, array of sports, and excellent drama facilities would be good for him. So we paid.

During his time there he appreciated the small classes, the fact that there was no disruption, the friends and opportunities and the excellent teaching. He is also adamant that he gained a certain confidence, "an ability to stand out in a crowd and to make my voice heard". He worked hard and left with 10 GCSEs at top grades.

However, he wanted to return to the state system for sixth form, because he felt some of the students lived in a privileged bubble, with no real knowledge of the outside world. He went on to read neuroscience at university and is now applying for a PhD. He may well have followed the same path if he'd stayed at his independent school; it's hard to say.

When I think of the astronomical amount of money five years of our son's education cost – about **£100,000** – I appreciate what an extraordinary gift it was, but I do wonder whether the equivalent amount would have been better spent on a deposit for a flat, or to get our children through university **instead of them having to accrue** such burdensome debt.

There is also the fact that top universities are now positively discriminating for state-educated children, and employers are no longer so impressed by the cachet of a privately educated candidate. With VAT now added to school fees, it's a decision that needs considerable thought.

Perspectives