

## **Title: Rethinking the Debate: Why We Need Better Data and Balanced Research on Independent Schooling**

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The public debate about independent schooling in the UK has become increasingly polarised. On one side, there are claims of privilege, inequality, and social stratification. On the other, there are defences of choice, quality, and contribution to public life. But what's often missing from this discussion—across media commentary, political rhetoric, and even some research—is balance, rigour, and inclusivity. Much of the existing data is partial, the framing often one-sided, and the voices of families who actually choose independent education rarely heard.

As an academic researcher with a background in education and systems theory, I believe one of the most constructive things we can do is to improve the quality and integrity of the data that informs this debate. This doesn't mean advocating for or against private education per se. It means committing to the basic principle that if we are to talk about the role of independent schools in our society, we should do so with evidence that is methodologically sound, inclusive in scope, and capable of capturing the diversity of what private schooling really looks like in the UK today.

Too often, we rely on data from narrow samples—such as surveys conducted through wealth management firms or analyses that disproportionately focus on high-profile institutions like Eton, Harrow, and Winchester. While these schools undoubtedly have a significant place in the public imagination, they are not representative of the independent sector as a whole. There are hundreds of smaller schools—some faith-based, some focused on special educational needs, others offering pedagogical alternatives—that serve a wide range of families. These stories, preferences, and contributions rarely surface in the national conversation.

A key example of this gap was highlighted recently in coverage of the proposed VAT changes on school fees. Several widely-circulated reports suggested that only 3–5% of students might leave the independent sector if the policy were implemented. Yet emerging evidence suggests this estimate may be far too low. What's striking is how little independent, publicly accessible data exists to ground these claims—on both sides. We urgently need research that draws from a more representative pool of parents and families, including those who are not at the top end of the income distribution, who make real sacrifices to send their children to independent schools, and whose experiences are largely absent from current datasets.

This is where AFIS, in my view, can play a meaningful role. By building a platform that connects with a broad base of independent school families, AFIS has the potential to support the development of a more representative and transparent research base. Done well, such research can not only challenge misconceptions, but also elevate the level of public understanding around who chooses independent education and why.

In this work, objectivity and methodological care are vital. If research is to be seen as credible, it must avoid becoming another echo chamber. That means including divergent views, asking challenging questions, and designing studies that are open to complexity and contradiction. The aim is not to prove a point, but to illuminate a social phenomenon—private schooling in the UK—in all its diversity, tension, and nuance.

My role as Consultant Research Adviser will be to support this effort: helping to shape the design of research projects, advise on methodological strategies, and ensure that the resulting work stands up to scrutiny—whether from policymakers, academics, journalists, or the wider public. This involves more than simply applying established methods. It’s about thinking systemically: recognising that education is not an isolated field but one that is deeply entangled with economic, cultural, and technological dynamics.

Ultimately, good research doesn’t give us easy answers. But it does provide a more honest, thoughtful, and inclusive foundation for decision-making. If AFIS can help generate that kind of research—rooted in integrity, open-mindedness, and a commitment to truth-seeking—then it will be a significant and timely contribution to a national debate that badly needs light, not just heat.