

Benefiting the public? A study of private-state school partnerships

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Executive Summary

The contribution of private-state school partnerships to the public benefit is one of the main ways that private schools justify their charitable status.

However the nature, scale, and impact of these partnerships is largely unknown, as there has been little research outside of the Independent Schools Council's (ISC) own reporting on the topic. The ISC's 2023 annual census shows 75% of its member schools were in a partnership with a state school (1,043 out of 1,395).¹ However, state schools have never been comprehensively surveyed for their views and experiences of these partnerships.

We have now sought that information from state schools, by sending Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to a random sample of 400 state schools in England. Of these, 277 schools (69%) responded with details of their partnership activity with private schools from September 2021 to December 2022.

Key finding 1: No state schools could provide evidence of evaluating the impact of partnership activity

Perhaps most strikingly, the accountability and impact of these partnerships was barely evidenced. Our research asked for documentation regarding the impact of partnerships. Of the 277 state schools that responded:

- Only one school (in Kensington and Chelsea) could provide documents that described the partnership
- Only three schools (in Barnet, Richmond upon Thames, and Surrey) reported some financial benefit from the relationship
- No school evaluated the impact of partnership activity, whether on pupil attainment or staff professional development

This demonstrates that the majority of private-state school partnerships were relatively superficial associations rather than deeply collaborative endeavours with evidenced impact evaluation. This calls into question claims that these partnerships offer substantial contributions to the public benefit, or act to narrow the disadvantage gap.

Key finding 2: Superficial 'pupil events' comprise the majority of partnerships

In terms of the types of activities, 10% of respondent schools engaged in a partnership that included an activity that we categorised as a 'pupil event' (e.g. invitations to lectures, joint sporting events or drama performances).

The majority (85%) of these events were superficial in scope, insofar as they tended to be one-off activities that did not offer targeted support. Examples include:

- an invitation to The Wizard of Oz performed by private school pupils
- joint carol singing
- playing football between a state and private school

¹ ISC (2023) *ISC Annual Census*. Independent Schools Council. https://www.isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf

However, the remainder of pupil events (15%) were more substantial, involving more sustained or targeted support, such as running a week-long summer school or supporting university entrance through mock interviews.

Activities outside pupil events were rarer, particularly relating to staff secondment. Our research revealed that:

- Only 3% (8 schools) were in a partnership in which they used private schools' facilities
- Only 2% (5 schools) had staff involvement in professional development with a private school
- Only 1% (4 schools) had benefitted from pupil secondment from a private school e.g. to support pupils with reading
- And only 1% (1 school) had benefitted from private school staff secondment

Key finding 3: Only 1% of state schools reported partnerships targeted at disadvantaged pupils

There was evidence that some partnership activities were targeted at high-attaining pupils—31% of state schools in a partnership had at least one activity targeted in this way. This complements research that shows private schools often use partnership activities as marketing and recruitment tools.²

At the same time, private schools did not tend to target partnership activities at disadvantaged pupils. Only three schools (in Bedford, Oxfordshire, and Surrey) reported partnership activities specifically targeted at disadvantaged pupils, which represents 1% of state schools that responded to our FOI request.

Key finding 4: Partnerships are disproportionately in London and the South East

Our research found that 13% of state schools were engaged in a partnership with one or more private schools. This proportion is perhaps unsurprising, given the small number of private schools (about 2,400) compared with the number of state schools in England (about 20,000).

However, these partnerships were not evenly spread across state schools. Our data shows these partnerships were disproportionately with state schools in London and the South East of England. For example, while 27% of the state schools from the South East said that they were engaged in partnership activity, and 17% of those in London, this dropped to 4% of schools in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Overall, given the vast majority of private-state school partnerships are relatively superficial associations, rather than more collaborative activities with evidenced impact on pupils or staff, it is unlikely that they contribute substantially to the public benefit.

² Wilde, R.J. *et al.* (2016) 'Private Schools and the Provision of "Public Benefit"', *Journal of Social Policy*, 45(2), pp. 305–323, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000719>, and Hunnaball, M., Jones, J. and Maguire, M. (2022) 'Independent and state school partnerships (ISSPs) in England: systemic tensions and contemporary policy resolutions', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 54(2), pp. 143–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2021.1960287>

Introduction

Private schools with charitable status are required to provide a public benefit. The Charity Commission stipulates that this must go beyond ‘token’ benefits for those that cannot afford the school fees (Charity Commission, 2013). However, it is private school governors that determine how this public benefit criterion is to be met (Sloan, 2012).

There are three main ways that private schools justify their contribution to the public benefit: 1) providing bursaries; 2) engaging in partnerships with state schools; and 3) fundraising and charity work (Wilde *et al.*, 2016). This report focuses on the second of these.

Private school stakeholders, such as the Independent Schools Council (ISC), make a number of claims about private-state school partnerships. These range from broad statements about substantial contributions to the ‘common good’ (ISC, 2021), to more specific claims that ‘partnerships support levelling up, enhance academic opportunity, improve teacher training, narrow the disadvantage gap, strengthen careers advice and university applications’ (ISC, 2022a, p. 1). Others claim that these partnerships should be a ‘force of improvement in the whole system’ (School Partnerships Alliance, 2022).

These arguments have featured in recent parliamentary debates about private schools. For example, in opposition to a Labour Party motion on reforming private schools’ tax status, the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan, (2023) said:

“I remind right hon. and hon. Members that two thirds of Independent Schools Council members—almost 1,000 of them—are engaged in mutually beneficial cross-sector partnerships with state-funded schools. Those schools share expertise, best practice and facilities to the benefit of children in all the schools involved.”

Despite the importance of this topic to contemporary policy debates, private-state school partnerships have received limited attention within research.

Of the literature that does exist, it has been found that headteachers in both the state and the private sector perceive local benefits from partnerships. These local benefits derive from activities such as ‘deliver[ing] additional access to resources and provid[ing] a space in which diverse groups of young people and their teachers can work with differently privileged peers’ (Hunnaball, Jones and Maguire, 2022, p. 155).

However, research has noted that private schools tend to engage in partnership activities that benefit themselves. In particular, they engage in partnership activities to market their school to prospective parents (Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hunnaball, Jones and Maguire, 2022). One private school headteacher put it this way:

“Most of the links that we have, which are schemes which we run, are with primary schools, and the reason for that rather than going for older age groups is they’ve already chosen the school to which they’re going to go. And obviously with... Year 5’s and 6’s, we’ve got parents who might consider sending their children to us anyway, so it’s sort of in our interest...”

(Wilde *et al.*, 2016, p. 315)

These local benefits, including for private schools' recruitment strategies, provide little evidence that private-state school partnerships are a 'force of improvement in the whole system' (School Partnerships Alliance, 2022) or that they support levelling up in any substantial way (ISC, 2022a). Hunnaball and colleagues (2022) say the following, in response to these types of claim:

"...none of these activities and experiences [in private-state school partnerships], however worthwhile of themselves, offers any significant challenge to the dual system of state-funded and private schools of England. Indeed, any claims about equality in these settings may be seen as being potentially misleading and, even more strongly, may sometimes work to obscure the enormous discrepancies in resourcing that exist between the sectors." (p.155)

Although research on private-state school partnerships is limited, there is a larger body of work on school partnerships within the state sector. From this arises a useful distinction between *associations* and *collaborations*. While *associations* are relatively superficial engagements, such as the occasional meeting or interaction between schools, *collaborations* are more advanced forms of partnership that involve sustained joint activity, with shared goals and values (Ainscow and West, 2006; Chapman, 2019).³

Whether a partnership is an association or a collaboration has important consequences. In the absence of shared goals and values, relatively superficial *associations* tend to have a limited impact, acting to maintain traditional ways of working and failing to facilitate knowledge exchange between schools (Armstrong, Brown and Chapman, 2021). In contrast, *collaborations* are more likely to bring about transformation and impact through their joint activity and shared goals.

This distinction between *associations* and *collaborations* is adopted within the report.

To investigate the nature, scale and impact of private-state school partnerships, this report is organised as follows:

1. The first section provides an analysis of existing data from ISC annual censuses.
2. The second section presents new evidence, drawing on data from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to a random sample of state schools in England.

³ Chapman (2019) actually outlines four different school partnership levels: association, cooperation, collaboration and collegiality. For simplicity, this report adopts only 'association' and 'collaboration', which captures the distinction between those partnerships with and without shared goals.

What can we learn from ISC data?

The number and type of partnership activities

The ISC conducts an annual census of their 1,395 private school members, who educate around 80% of private school pupils in the UK (ISC, 2022b). Within this census, ISC members provide information about their partnerships with state schools.

In the latest ISC (2023) annual census, documenting activity in the 2022 calendar year, it was reported that 1,043 private schools had engaged in 8,793 partnership activities. The meaning of this latter figure is somewhat unclear. The ISC (2023) sometimes refers to this as the number of *partnerships*, but this is more commonly said to be the number of *partnership activities*.⁴

This ambiguity is compounded as it is unclear whether each of these 8,793 partnership activities constitute a unique activity. It is possible that one activity, say playing football against a local school, could be double counted as both 'Share sports fields' and 'Play sporting fixtures with or against state schools'. If this is the case, this would over-estimate the number of activities. However, if a private school shares its sports fields with a range of different state schools, but this is only captured once in the ISC data, then this would under-estimate the number of activities.

These ambiguities highlight the weaknesses of the ISC data, and limit its potential to provide an understanding of the nature, scope and impact of private-state school partnerships.

However, putting these issues aside, there are things that we can learn from the ISC data. The headline figure of 8,793 partnership activities includes a range of different interactions between private and state schools. These range from superficial events, e.g. playing sports against a state school or invitations to a musical performance, to more collaborative activities, e.g. seconding staff to a state school or hosting joint events.

The ISC data reveals that the most common partnership activity within each of the five activity types (sporting, academic, music, drama, other) are all relatively superficial rather than more collaborative activities (see Table 1). These include: playing sports fixtures (753 private schools); invitations to attend lessons or workshops (575 private schools); invitations to attend music lessons or performances (352 private schools); invitations to attend drama classes or performances (353 private schools); and having members of staff serving as state school governors (627 private schools). These five activities constitute almost a third (30%) of all partnership activities.

⁴ The figure of 8,793 approximates the sum of activities in Table 1. As Table 1 catalogues the number of private schools engaged in at least one type of partnership activity, this way of estimating the total number of *partnership activities* may lead to an underestimation.

Table 1: Number of private schools engaged in a type of partnership activity, and change from 2020 to 2023 (Author's calculations, ISC Annual Censuses 2020 and 2023)

	No. of private schools	% change ('20 - '23)
Sporting Activities		
Play sporting fixtures with or against state schools	753	-22%
Host joint sporting events	490	-28%
Invite pupils to attend coaching sessions	315	-26%
Share sports fields	261	-25%
Share swimming pool	260	-20%
Share astroturf	209	-14%
Share other sports facilities (e.g. tennis courts)	170	-21%
Share sports centre	158	-23%
Second pupils to state schools (e.g. sports coaching)	101	+1%
Second coaching staff	88	-34%
Other	95	-10%
Academic Activities		
Invite pupils to attend lessons, workshops or other educational events	575	-31%
Share knowledge, skills, expertise and experience	562	-25%
Work together to improve the quality of teaching and learning for pupils	323	-28%
Second pupils to state schools (eg reading with younger pupils)	227	-19%
Help schools to prepare A Level pupils for entry to higher education	174	-17%
Share classrooms	162	-35%
Second teaching staff	151	-18%
Other	94	-29%
Music Activities		
Invite pupils to attend music lessons or performances	352	-30%
Host joint musical events	224	-36%
Second teaching staff	94	-19%
Second pupils to state schools (e.g. music coaching)	62	-3%
Other	78	-42%

Drama Activities		
Invite pupils to attend drama classes or performances	353	-34%
Share concert hall/theatre	191	-27%
Host joint drama events	111	-45%
Share dance studio	69	-23%
Second pupils to state schools (e.g. drama coaching)	45	+22%
Second teaching staff	35	-30%
Other	50	-44%
Other Activities		
Have members of staff serving as governors at state schools	627	-3%
Participate in teacher training events with local state school teachers	331	No data
Partner for debating and public speaking clubs/events	191	-36%
Partner for other extracurricular activities (eg chess clubs, socials and school trips)	182	-39%
Partner with schools to host exams (e.g. music and drama)	171	-38%
Partner for various art projects such as hosting exhibitions, running art classes (eg life drawing and pottery)	161	-28%
Partner with state schools for Combined Cadet Force	70	-9%
Academy partnership (sponsorship or co-sponsorship, excluding via federation)	21	-16%
Other	116	No data

More collaborative activities were less commonplace than more superficial events. For example, there were 151 private schools that seconded a member of academic teaching staff—this represents 11% of ISC private schools.

This point is also evidenced by the fact that *hosting joint events* was less common than more superficial *invitations to attend*. Partnerships were 1.5 times more likely to involve an invitation to a musical performance or class, compared with a joint musical event. Similarly, partnerships were over 3 times more likely to involve an invitation to attend a drama performance, compared with participating in a joint drama event.

Thus, the ISC data demonstrates that many partnerships are relatively superficial associations, which are likely to involve little collaboration between the schools. This contextual information is essential to understand the gross figure of 8,793 partnership activities publicised by the ISC, in order to avoid overstating the public benefit that is likely to derive from these partnerships.

Changes over time (2016 to 2023)

In addition to analysing the nature of partnerships, the ISC data can also be used to track changes over time. Figure 1 provides information about the number of ISC private schools engaged in partnerships.⁵

Figure 1: Number of private schools engaged in partnerships reported in ISC censuses (2016–2023), by activity type (Author’s calculation)

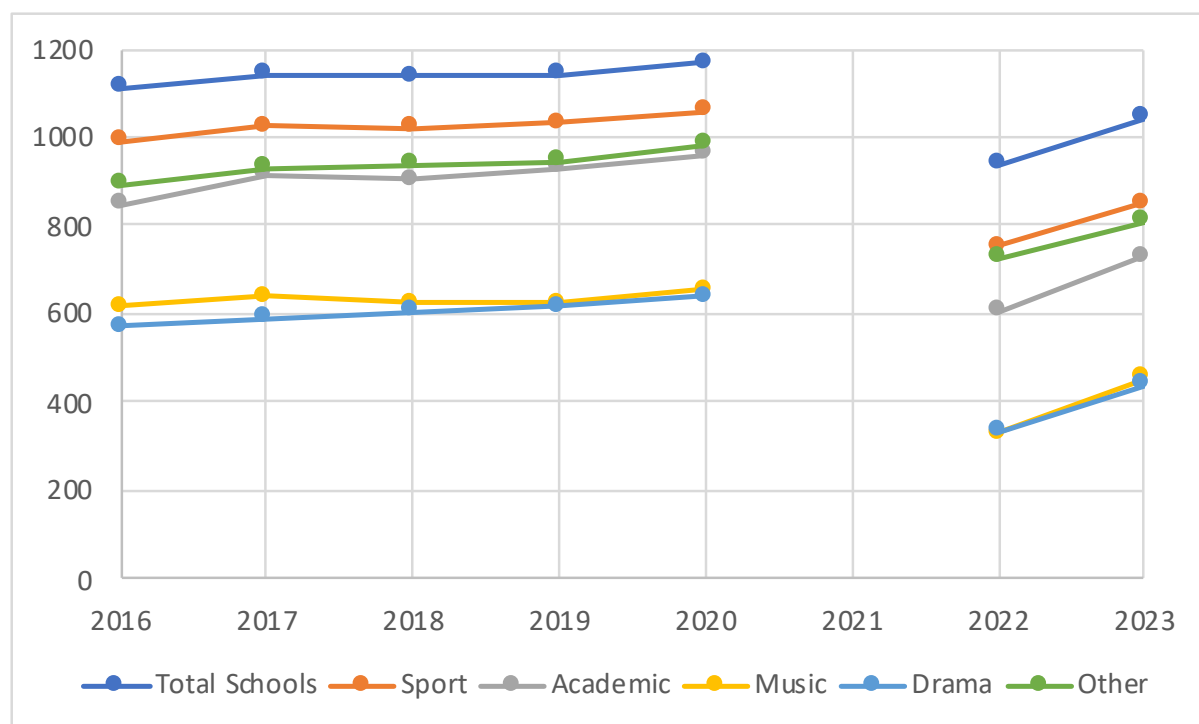


Figure 1 shows a 5% increase in the number of private schools engaged in partnerships from 2016 to 2020. These increases are seen across all five activity types.

However, partnership activity decreased substantially due to Covid, with only a partial recovery in the 2023 census. While the ISC (2023) has widely reported a 26% increase in partnership activity from 2022 to 2023, it is important to note that partnerships remained well below the level in 2020 (see Table 1).⁶ Compared with the census in 2020, the total number of private schools in partnerships was 11% lower and the number of partnership activities was 25% lower in 2023.

⁵ Information about partnership activities is available in ISC Censuses from 2016 to 2023, although there was no detailed reporting in 2021 due to Covid.

⁶ The ISC census of 2023 captured information from the 2022 calendar year. It is likely that school partnerships may have been reduced in this context, due to the ongoing impact of Covid.

Partnerships from a state school perspective

To gain a deeper understanding, this project sought to gather information on the nature, scope and impact of private-state school activities from a state-school perspective. This section begins by outlining the methods used, before presenting the findings.

Methods

Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were sent to a random sample of 400 state schools in February 2023, to gather information on the nature, scope and impact of private school partnerships. The FOI request covered: the names of private school partners; what these partnership activities involved; whether these activities were targeted at disadvantaged and/or high-attaining pupils; any financial benefit; and any impact evaluation.⁷ We asked for information covering September 2021 to December 2022. For full details of the FOI request, see the Appendix.

The random sample was taken from England School Information data, downloaded in January 2023 (Department for Education, 2023b). The data covers the 2021–22 academic year and includes information about all schools in England. This was limited to academies and maintained schools that had not recently closed, which resulted in an overall population of 20,072 schools. A random sample of 400 schools was created using the `sample_n` function in R.

277 state schools responded to our FOI request, representing 69% of the sample. The respondents (277 schools) and the sample (400 schools) were found to broadly resemble the overall population (see Tables A, B, and C in the Appendix). Two differences were: community schools were overrepresented in the respondents (36.1%) compared with the overall population (29.0%); and academy converters were slightly underrepresented in the respondents (28.2%) compared with the overall population (32.4%).

Data analysis involved variables relating to school type and geographical region, which were available from the England School Information data. Data on the percentage of pupils on free school meals was available from Establishment fields from Department for Education (2023a), downloaded June 2023 and linked to the England School Information data using schools' unique reference number.

The raw data from the FOI requests was used to create the following variables:

- Number of partnerships: the total number of private schools that are named by state schools.⁸
- Number of partnership activities. This variable was created by counting the number of activities mentioned within a school's description of their partnership activities.

⁷ The FOI request used the term 'collaboration' rather than 'partnership'. Initial conversations with state school leaders revealed that 'partnership' may be interpreted as a more formal arrangement. To clarify our request, the FOI contained several examples, including both superficial and collaborative activities.

⁸ Two private schools were excluded as the activity involved 1) helping pupils apply for a scholarship scheme at a private school and 2) transition work for pupils allocated a place at a private school in Year 7. These two instances were not judged to represent a partnership activity, as they primarily benefited the private school.

- Number of each type of partnership activity. Each activity was assigned one of the following categories: facilities use; host a pupil event; participate in staff professional development or school networks to share best practice; second staff; and second pupils. As the category ‘host a pupil event’ involved a range of activities, this was further divided into:
 - o Three sub-categories: academic; sports; or arts/music/drama.
 - o *One-off and superficial activities* (e.g. playing football against local school) *versus activities with sustained engagement or targeted support* (e.g. running a week long summer school).

Given the respondents were broadly representative, it is possible to make inferences about the overall population of state schools in England. Population means and 90% confidence intervals were generated using the numSummary and prop.test functions in R (see Appendix).

How widespread were the partnerships?

We found 36 of the 277 state schools had engaged in a partnership activity with a private school in the 16 months between September 2021 and December 2022. This represents 13% of respondents. These 36 state schools were involved in 61 different partnerships and 85 activities.

Using this data, we can make inferences about all state schools in England (20,072 schools). We estimate that approximately 2,608 state schools were involved in at least one private-state school partnership, with 4,420 total partnerships and 6,159 activities between September 2021 and December 2022.

When compared with the ISC’s figure of 8,793 partnership activities, we see that our estimations are broadly in-keeping, albeit on the lower side. The different timescales (one calendar year for the ISC vs 16 months for our data) and populations (28,132 UK state schools for the ISC vs 20,072 English state schools for our data) make a direct comparison challenging. To make a crude comparison, if the ISC data was scaled over 16 months, we can then compare the mean number of partnership activities per state school. The ISC data would suggest 0.42 activities per UK state school, whereas our data suggests 0.31 per English state school.

Which state schools were engaged in these partnerships?

Private-state school partnerships were not evenly spread across the UK. Table 2 shows that partnerships were disproportionately in southern England, in particular London and the South East. For example, while 27% of the state schools from the South East said that they were engaged in partnership activity, this dropped to 4% of schools in the North West or Yorkshire and the Humber. These regional inequalities do reflect the geographical spread of private schools, with the ISC (2023) describing how ‘the majority (53%) of ISC schools are located in the London, South East, and South Central ISC regions, educating 50% of all ISC pupils’ (p.8).

Table 2: Within each region, what percentage of state schools reported engaging in a private school partnership? (FOI requests, n=277)

	Percentage of state schools
South East	27%
London	17%
East	14%
West Midlands	14%
South West	13%
North East	8%
East Midlands	5%
North West	4%
Yorkshire and the Humber	4%

The prevalence of partnership activities also differed by school type (see Table 3). While 38% of free schools and 21% of academy converters engaged in a private school partnership, this was considerably lower for other school types.⁹ Only 6% of sponsor-led academies and 5% of voluntary controlled schools engaged in a private-school partnership. This provides some evidence that private schools were more likely to engage in partnerships with schools outside of local authority control, as well as traditionally high-performing schools.¹⁰

Table 3: Within each type of state school, what percentage reported engaging in a private school partnership? (FOI requests, n=277)

	Percentage of state schools
Free schools	38%
Academy converter	21%
Voluntary aided school	16%
Foundation school	10%
Community school	8%
Academy sponsor led	6%
Voluntary controlled school	5%

There was also some weak evidence that private schools were more likely to engage in partnerships with schools serving more privileged pupil populations. State schools in a partnership had an average of 18.4% pupils on free school meals, compared with 22.7% for schools not in a partnership ($p=0.12$).

It is also interesting that 25.0% of secondary schools were engaged in a partnership, compared with 11.4% of primary schools. However, given primary schools outnumber secondary schools in England (approx. 5:1 ratio), this means the majority of private-state partnerships involve primary schools.

⁹ Note, there were only eight free schools that responded to our FOI requests. This is a small sample, and caution should be applied in generalising the results.

¹⁰ Note that academy converters are normally those schools with 'Good' or 'Outstanding' status that voluntarily converted to academy status, whereas sponsor-led academies tended to convert due to under-performance.

What type of activities were involved in the partnerships?

This section turns to the question of what activities were involved in these partnerships. Tables 4 and 5 show that the majority of partnership activities involved hosting some type of pupil event, constituting 69% of activities and involving 10% of state schools. If we break these pupil events into sub-categories, 27% focused on an academic topic (e.g. a history lecture), 22% focused on sport (e.g. playing netball), and 20% focused on art, music or drama (e.g. an invitation to a performance).

Table 4: Of the reported partnership activities, what was the percentage of different activity types? (FOI requests, n=85)

	Percentage of partnership activities
Hosting a pupil event	69%
Facilities use	12%
Second pupils to the school	7%
Staff involvement in CPD	6%
Second staff to the school	4%
Miscellaneous	2%

Table 5: What percentage of state schools engaged in a particular type of partnership activity? (FOI requests, n=277)

	Percentage of state schools
Host a pupil event	10%
Facilities use	3%
Staff involvement in CPD	2%
Second pupils to the school	1%
Second staff to the school	1%

These pupil events were analysed to assess how many of them were superficial, rather than more sustained and targeted support. 85% were found to be superficial. This included an invitation to The Wizard of Oz performed by the private school's pupils, joint carol singing, and playing football against the private school. However, some activities did involve more sustained engagement or targeted support, such as running a week-long summer school or running mock interviews for university.

The next largest type of partnership activity was facilities use—this involved a state school using the facilities or resources of a private school without interacting with their pupils. This typically involved use of swimming pools, sports pitches or theatres. Ten instances of facilities use were found, representing 12% of partnership activities and involving 3% of state schools.

Within their FOI responses, several state schools clarified that using private schools' facilities often required substantial costs. They often needed to pay for transport to the private school or to pay for additional features, such as swimming instructor fees. However, one state school explained that the private school also provided transportation to access their facilities.

Other partnership activities were relatively rare. We found evidence of pupil secondment from private schools (7% of activities) often to help with reading, and staff secondment (4% of activities) often to help with subjects in the wider curriculum, such as languages, sports or music. There was also staff involvement in professional development opportunities or engaging in wider school networks to share best practice (6% of activities). Less than 2% of state schools benefitted from these types of partnership activity (see Table 5).

These findings complement the ISC data discussed in the previous section. In both cases, most of the partnership activities were relatively superficial pupil events, rather than forms of activity that require greater resources and collaboration, such as seconding staff.

One area of divergence between our findings and the ISC data concerns the extent of facilities use. Our data suggests this is less widespread, representing 12% of partnership activities and involving 3% of state schools, whereas the ISC data found 1,480 partnership activities involving facilities use, representing around 17% of activities. This difference likely stems from a difference in data collection.¹¹

Which state school pupils were these activities targeted at?

We asked state schools whether partnership activities were targeted at pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, as this could maximise the public benefit of partnerships. Only three state schools said that activities were targeted in this way—representing 1% of state schools.¹² However, several state schools described how they themselves allocated opportunities primarily to their disadvantaged learners.

There was evidence that partnership activities were targeted at pupils with high prior attainment.¹³ 31% of state schools in a partnership had at least one activity targeted in this way. If we consider the 16 state schools that participated in an academic pupil event, 50% reported partnership activities targeted at pupils with high prior attainment.

This targeting of activities at pupils of high attainment complements existing research that has found some private schools use partnership activities as a way to market their school to prospective pupils (Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hunnaball, Jones and Maguire, 2022). For example, a private school leader within Hunnaball and colleagues' (2022) study acknowledged that their partnerships were not only altruistic, but also 'about raising the awareness of the school for lots of people who also could come and could pay' (p.149). There is scope for future research to explore this in greater depth.

11 In this report, an activity was categorised 'facilities use' when there was no interaction with private school pupils, e.g. use of the swimming pool. In contrast, it is possible that the ISC data allows a single activity, say playing a football match, to be labelled as both 'Share sports fields' and 'Play sporting fixtures with or against state schools'. This would lead to higher reported rates of 'facilities use'.

12 It may be the case that private schools target *state schools serving disadvantaged populations rather than disadvantaged pupils within state schools*. This data was not captured, but it is unlikely to be widespread given state schools in partnerships were likely to have a lower rate of pupils on free school meals, compared with those not in partnerships.

13 This data was not always well reported for each activity. Conclusions can only be made about the number of state schools that had at least one activity targeted at those with high prior attainment.

Were the partnerships likely to be associations or collaborations?

The majority of private–state school partnerships were relatively superficial associations, rather than more collaborative endeavours. Several pieces of evidence support this.

First, only one school, representing 0.4% of respondents, could provide documents that described their private school partnership. This suggests that few partnerships have strategic documents that establish common goals and values.

Second, there was little evidence of financial benefits for state schools. 20 of the 36 (56%) schools in a partnership reported no financial benefit, and a further 13 (36%) reported that this data was not collected. That 92% of state schools could not provide any evidence of a financial benefit from a partnership illustrates the superficial nature of many of these relationships. The three state schools that did report financial benefits primarily discussed facilities use, e.g. the cost of renting a pool or a minibus.

Third, our FOI requests found no evidence of state schools evaluating the impact of partnership activity on their pupils or staff.¹⁴ The lack of evaluation again suggests that the majority of partnerships are best characterised as associations, and that claims about their impact are unlikely to be evidence-based.¹⁵

The associational nature of the majority of private–state school partnerships also calls into question claims that partnerships help to tackle the disadvantage gap (ISC, 2022a, p. 1) or are a ‘force of improvement in the whole system’ (School Partnerships Alliance, 2022). This supports Hunnaball and colleagues’ (2022) conclusion that partnerships largely fail to address the inequalities between private and state education.

¹⁴ One school claimed to have done some evaluation, but was unable to provide any documentation to support this assertion. The absence of documents suggests that no formal evaluation occurred.

¹⁵ This lack of evaluation has also been noted by private school stakeholders. A recent ISC (2020) document noted that ‘very few schools are effectively measuring their partnerships as the vast majority of schools were unable to give a comprehensive impact evaluation statement’.

Conclusion

Although private–state school partnerships feature prominently in narratives concerning private schools’ contribution to public benefit, this topic has been underexplored in research.

This report provides evidence on the nature, scale, and impact of these partnerships. It aims to address weaknesses in existing data, as well as gathering state schools’ perspectives.

Overall, 13% of state schools were engaged in a partnership with at least one private school. However, these partnerships were not evenly spread across state schools. We found that partnerships were disproportionately with state schools in London and the South East of England.

It was found that the majority of partnerships involved hosting pupil events, with 10% of state schools engaging in this type of activity. However, 85% of pupil events were superficial, including an invitation to The Wizard of Oz performed by a private school’s pupils, joint carol singing, and playing football against a private school. Some activities did involve more sustained and targeted support, such as running a week-long summer school or offering mock interviews for university.

Other partnership activities were less common and included: facilities use alone (3% of state schools); staff professional development and sharing best practice (2% of state schools); seconding pupils (1% of state schools); and seconding staff (1% of state schools).

Private schools did not tend to target partnership activities at disadvantaged pupils. Only three schools reported this type of targeting, which represents 1% of state schools.

However, there was some evidence that activities were targeted at those pupils with high prior achievement. 31% of state schools in a partnership had at least one activity targeted in this way. This complements existing research findings that some private schools use partnership activities as marketing and recruitment tools (Wilde *et al.*, 2016; Hunnaball, Jones and Maguire, 2022).

The majority of private–state school partnerships were relatively superficial associations rather than deeply collaborative endeavours. Of the 277 state schools that responded:

- Only one school (in Kensington and Chelsea) could provide documents that described the partnership
- Only three schools (in Barnet, Richmond upon Thames, and Surrey) reported some financial benefit from the relationship
- No school evaluated the impact of partnership activity, whether on pupil attainment or staff professional development

The evidence in this report supports Hunnaball and colleagues’ (2022) conclusion that partnerships largely fail to address the inequalities between private and state education. This also challenges claims that private–school partnerships help to tackle the disadvantage gap and support levelling up, (ISC, 2022a, p. 1) or that they are a ‘force of improvement in the whole system’ (School Partnerships Alliance, 2022).

Finally, the evidence presented in this report calls into question the extent to which private–state school partnerships offer a substantial contribution to the public benefit.

Acknowledgements

We are aware that it is burdensome for schools (and therefore taxpayers) to supply information to researchers and the public. We would therefore like to express our gratitude to all those school staff who took the time to respond to our request.

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The University of Manchester

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FOI Request

Please provide the following, for the period covering the **academic year 2021-22** and the **autumn term of 2022-23** (i.e. Sept '21 to Dec '22):

1. Please provide the **names of all private schools** with whom you engaged in collaborative activity. *Examples of collaborative activity include: using a school's facilities, co-designing a musical concert, or attending events hosted at the school.*
2. If you have any **documents that describe this collaboration**, please attach these. *Note, we expect few collaborations to have these documents. These are more likely to exist for formalised partnerships e.g. a 'Memorandum of Understanding'.*
3. Please provide a detailed note on **what activities each collaboration involved**.
4. Were any collaborations aimed primarily at pupils from **disadvantaged backgrounds?** (Y/N) *If yes, which activities were targeted in this way?*
5. Were any collaborations aimed primarily at pupils with **high prior attainment?** (Y/N) *If yes, which activities were targeted in this way?*
6. What was the approximate **financial benefit** of these collaborations for your school? *Note, when there was no financial benefit, please respond '£0'; when this information is not collected, please respond 'NA'.*
7. Did your school/academy trust **measure the impact** of the private-state school collaborations e.g. the impact on pupil attainment? (Y/N)
8. If yes, please attach the documents or data you hold with the **evidence of this impact**.

Representativeness of respondents and sample, compared with the overall population

Table A: Population, sample and respondents by school type

	Population	Sample	Respondents
Academy converter*	32.4%	30.3%	28.2%
Academy sponsor led**	12.2%	11.5%	11.2%
Community school	29.0%	34.5%	36.1%
Foundation school	3.4%	3.5%	3.6%
Free schools	2.4%	2.5%	2.9%
Voluntary aided school	12.3%	12.3%	11.2%
Voluntary controlled school	8.0%	5.5%	6.9%
Studio schools	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
University technical college	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%

* Includes Academy 16-19 converter

**Includes Academy 16 to 19 sponsor led

Table B: Population, sample and respondents by age of pupils

	Population	Sample	Respondents
Involves Primary	84.3%	86.5%	88.4%
Involves Secondary	16.9%	14.8%	13.7%
Involves Post-16	10.7%	9.0%	9.4%

Table C: Population, sample and respondents by region of school

	Population	Sample	Respondents
East	11.8%	12.5%	15.2%
East Midlands	9.6%	8.5%	7.9%
London	11.4%	11.8%	10.5%
North East	5.1%	4.3%	4.3%
North West	14.4%	16.5%	17.0%
South East	15.5%	15.8%	17.7%
South West	11.0%	10.5%	8.7%
West Midlands	10.8%	10.8%	10.1%
Yorkshire and Humber	10.3%	9.5%	8.7%

Population-level estimations: 90% confidence intervals

Table D documents population-level estimations of the mean per state school in England (20,072 schools). The 90% confidence interval (CI) is also reported.

Table D: Population-level estimations of the mean per school, 90% CI

Estimation of the mean	Pop. level est.	Lower CI	Upper CI
Number of private-state school partnerships	0.22	0.15	0.29
Number of partnership activities	0.31	0.20	0.41
Number of state schools with at least one partnership	0.13	0.10	0.17
Number of partnership activities (pupil event)	0.21	0.14	0.29
Number of partnership activities (facilities use)	0.04	0.01	0.06
Number of partnership activities (staff CPD)	0.02	0.00	0.03
Number of partnership activities (seconding pupils)	0.02	0.00	0.04
Number of partnership activities (seconding staff)	0.01	0.00	0.03
Number of partnership activities (miscellaneous)	0.01	0.00	0.02
Number of partnership activities (pupil event – academic)	0.08	0.04	0.12
Number of partnership activities (pupil event – sports)	0.07	0.04	0.10
Number of partnership activities (pupil event – music/art/drama)	0.06	0.03	0.09
Number of state schools with partnership activity targeted at disadvantaged pupils	0.01	0.00	0.03
Number of state schools with partnership activity targeted at high-attaining pupils	0.04	0.02	0.06
Number of state schools reporting a financial benefit from a partnership	0.01	0.00	0.03
Number of state schools that evaluate the impact of private school partnership(s)	0.00	0.00	0.02