

FOR-PROFIT 'FAIREducation' COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLING

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For the purpose of this brief thought experiment, a comprehensive school will be defined as one which is non-selective and caters for a variety of children (aged 11–16) from the local area, irrespective of their ability or background. I am also going to assume that the UK government has recently introduced a system of education vouchers, redirecting public funds from schools to parents. Therefore, each parent now receives a voucher for £5,000 per annum per child, to be spent at their school of choice. Schools can be public or private and additional parental contributions are encouraged.

The traditional state comprehensive school will continue to cost £5,000 per annum and so no additional fees are required. However entrepreneurs are quick to recognise that there is increasing pupil and parental dissatisfaction with these schools and market research suggests that dissatisfied parents will be prepared to pay more to guarantee a better quality of education. Chains of private schools charging £7,000 therefore emerge to cater for this market, with parents required to make an additional contribution of £2,000.

Following the development of these schools, entrepreneurs soon identify another emerging gap in the market. Building upon the popularity of 'compassionate consumerism' and 'Fairtrade' products, a chain of for-profit 'FairEducation' comprehensive schools is established. These schools charge £7,500 with parents required to make an additional contribution of £2,500 per annum. However, while £2,000 is used to cover the costs of educating the parents' child, the additional £500 is used to help subsidise free school places for children from low-income families. If a free school place costs an additional £2,000, then for every four children whose parents are paying full fees, one child from a low-income family will receive a free school place. Therefore, in a school of 500 children, there will be 100 children whose parents pay no additional fees. This new chain of 'FairEducation' schools can therefore market themselves as combining 'Excellence in Education with Equality of Opportunity in the Community'. They will aim to provide an excellent education and guarantee that at least 20% of the children

attending the school will be from local low-income families. This will be its competitive advantage.

Apart from generating income through school fees, the 'FairEducation' school will also look to attract income from its former pupils, who will be encouraged to give something back to the school, by way of annual subscriptions, special donations or by teaching at the school to help share their knowledge and experience.

As soon as the school begins to view each pupil as a potential source of future revenue, it will focus on delivering a life-changing educational experience which the pupil will hopefully never forget. The school may therefore decide to introduce nursery, primary and post-16 classes to enable it to have a much greater chance of providing a life-changing educational experience. Of course, it will not only be the former pupils themselves who may want to give something back to the school in their later life. Their parents may also provide another potential source of future revenue, if the school not only meets but exceeds parental expectations.

Recognising that not all of its pupils will be inclined towards academic success, the 'FairEducation' school will also develop a variety of capabilities to ensure that its non-academic pupils are also satisfied with their schooling experience. The 'FairEducation' school will therefore also aim to excel in competitive sports, the arts and entrepreneurship.

This brief experiment highlights two important points. First, while attempts to introduce comprehensive schooling in the UK into a state-controlled monopoly have resulted in catastrophic failure, this does not mean that it will meet a similar fate if introduced into a free and competitive market. Secondly, it also shows how the introduction of school fees can enable children from low-income families to gain access to much better educational opportunities than those currently on offer. At the local state comprehensive school, pupils receive 'free' education, of poor quality, valued at £5,000. However, at the for-profit 'FairEducation' comprehensive school, the same pupils now receive 'free' education, of an excellent quality, valued at £7,000.

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