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AS THEY BREAK*the Atlantic* Wire

Aug 27 2009, 4:43pm by Benjamin F. Carlson

How Charitable Are Private Schools?

Depends: do smart, needy kids get scholarships so that parents of rich, not-so-smart kids will shell out more?

Private schools provided superlative educations to some of the Web's most influential and prolific bloggers. So why are [Matt Yglesias](#) and [Felix Salmon](#), graduates of the Dalton School and Dulwich College respectively, arguing that their alma maters' tax-exempt status should be revoked?

It all turns on the question of whether private schools provide enough of a public service to be treated like charitable institutions. Salmon [argued](#) that universities, unless they "can demonstrate that they're actually spending their money on the public good," should have their sometimes gargantuan endowments taxed. He qualified:

No one's asking to abolish private schools, or even proposing that most of them lose their charitable status.

Many readers vehemently disagreed.

This entire Salmon position and post are an unwashed attempt at class warfare...

If you want the rich to pay more taxes just say so - don't dress it up in some "help the poor get educated" type bandwagon...

This proposal appears to be motivated by pure malice. Some people dislike elite schools and want to hurt them by any means available...

So why do privately-educated pundits think private schools should be taxed?

- **Diverts Resources from Public Schools**, says [Matthew Yglesias](#) at Think Progress. "Their main impact on the common weal is *negative*, drawing parents with resources and social capital out of the public school system and contributing to its neglect."
- **Steals Good Students** says [Felix Salmon](#) in a follow-up post. "To put it in economist-speak, private schools inflict a negative externality on the quality of education in the neighboring state-run schools."
- **Pretends to Be Altruistic**, argues the anonymous UK blogger [Hundred Pockets](#) in an elaboration on a comment at Salmon's blog. "Schools can charge higher fees to the parents of rich, dumb kids, if they offer free places to smart, poor kids. Why? Because peer groups matter, and parents know it." He [then elaborates](#) in a follow-up post, explaining that private schools are like clubs that pay models to attend so they can "charge more money to schlubs who want to dance Where The Pretty People Are."

Apart from vociferous reader reactions, [Adam Schaeffer](#) of the libertarian Cato Institute mounts the

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the Atlantic Wire

Welcome to The Atlantic Wire, a new addition to our digital family that tracks the biggest debates as they happen. From the op-ed pages and the blogosphere to television, radio, and magazines, we follow hundreds of writers who are the leading producers of opinion and commentary. We find the best analysis and the most daring arguments, revealing who's up, who's down, and who won the day. This summer, we preview a portion of the full site, which launches in September.

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best opposing view to these pundits, whom he calls "ingrates." Far from costing taxpayers, he says, private schools are a boon to public coffers:

They complain about the lost tax revenue while dismissing out of hand the *billions* of dollars that parents and donors spend every year to educate children outside the government system.

The Debate

- [The Economics of Private Schools](#) *Felix Salmon*, Reuters
- [School for Rich Kids Isn't Charity](#) *Matthew Yglesias*, Think Progress
- [Faith, Hope and Private Schools](#) *A UK Economist*, Hundred Pockets
- [I Would Rather You Just Said "Thank You" and Went On Your Way](#) *Adam Schaeffer*, Cato Institute

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