
Private Schooling – is it worth the costs?

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Lush manicured lawns, posh accents, and parents with executive positions. Being a private school kid is something I've always worn with a badge of honour – after all, I know how elite a place in society we hold. With exorbitant fees, currently at more than R100 000 per annum, is it worth it to send your children to one of these fine institutions over a decent government school?

Like any rare thing, having a private school education is a massive privilege. I matriculated in 2010 from one of the most academically-strong girl schools (but also the priciest one), on the edges of Hillbrow and next door to the infamous Jo'burg Gen Hospital. It sticks out like a sore thumb with its historical white buildings and world-famous gardens, yet its surrounded by a truly South African landscape of dilapidated infrastructure and people hustling for change on about every street corner. But within those walls is safety and shelter where it's easy to remain oblivious to what's going on in the outside world.

We never had to worry about a thing. There was always running water and if for some reason a water problem arose, a swift email would be sent to parents asking them to use their discretion in deciding whether to leave their girls at home as a result. A private catering company provided food for boarders and there wasn't a spot of litre on the school grounds. Everything worked and everything worked well. More than just a very good education, parents definitely also pay for a service that keeps their children well looked-after, comfortable and happy.

For me, school was such a breeze. I matriculated as one of the “underachievers” with mostly Bs, while our grade got 268 distinctions between 80 girls. Our school prepared us well with impossibly hard prelims and quite a bit of spoon-feeding to ensure the school could boast about its 100% pass rate. We were set for the rest of our lives – or so we thought.

Getting to university was quite the cultural shock for me and other private school pupils. There, I found people of different backgrounds, rich and poor. My little bubble had burst. Many of us went to the University of Cape Town and Wits University, while others settled for small town institutions like Stellies and Rhodes. Some even spread their wings to far places overseas, including esteemed Ivy Leagues that are far from easy to get into. And we had all the confidence in the world when we first got there, we did go to private schools after all.

I was used to classes of 18 and sitting in lecture halls filled with hundreds of people was rather daunting. Tutorials had more of an intimate setting and this was my opportunity to size up the competition. What I found out disputed what I had believed all my life: that my elite schooling was superior to government schooling, meaning I would always be the smartest person in the room. I was surrounded by kids who were far more intelligent than I was and who put a lot more effort into their work than I did. They were getting marks in the high 80s while I was barely making 70s and even worse when I procrastinated and left work until the last minute.

My take on it all is this: as long as someone has the determination to succeed, the sky's the limit. It may sound cheesy or cliché, but I've seen kids who come from nothing overtake even the most intelligent private school student. When there are no resources, when teachers don't pitch up to school on any given day and textbooks don't arrive for the entire school year, determination is all a child has. Wanting to succeed and knowing they'll have to put their all into doing so because there's no other option is far more valuable than a private school education. In some ways, private schooling made me complacent and lazy. I expected things to be effortless, so I didn't put that much work into anything. I felt entitled to a degree and I expected good things to come to me because life had always been pleasant and easy. My goodness, the places I might be if my private education was replaced with fierce and unstoppable determination.

Of course, it's great to see potential employers' impressed facial expressions when they spot my high school education on my CV. I do believe that the school I went to holds a certain amount of power when applying for jobs – there is an appeal in hiring someone who possesses the unique kind of sophistication and poise that we have been trained to portray in every interaction. But while speaking well may get me the position I have my eye on, it for sure won't help me keep it. Strong resolve and hard work are the key ingredients in leading the lives we want to lead, and those, my friends, are priceless.