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Pay up! Pay up! And Play the Game!

Getting a decent education for your children requires cunning as well as money

Class war is never far away in British education. It's sad but true that most of the best schools are fee-paying ones, which help their pupils win the excellent exam grades that lead on to a state-subsidised place at top universities.

The government wants to change that: it bullies universities to take more state-school pupils, who are more likely to be from poor backgrounds. This week it issued tough new benchmarks for the number of state-school pupils that universities "ought" to take.

Distorting the system like this increases the chance that people will try to cheat it. The game is to get the maximum quality of education for the minimum outlay, while ensuring that your child is not fingered as a class enemy when it comes to university entrance.

If you have lots of cash, a bright child, and don't want too much hassle, the best option is to send your offspring to an independent school from the start. It will be costly: £5,000-10,000 a year at the primary stage, £ 6,000-20,000 for secondary school, depending on quality, location and whether it is a day or a boarding school. But when your child is 16, you move him to the state sector for two years. The government's bean counters will treat him as a state-school product.

To play safe, you can also move house to somewhere grotty. Universities are paid for taking students from poor districts. You can always move back to a more salubrious area as soon as your child's application has been accepted.

If that's too expensive or disruptive, there are plenty of other options. The simplest is to move to the catchment area for a good state school. In London, house prices may be up to 20% higher in the right catchment area—but you can regard that as an investment: sell the house once your child is safely enrolled, and you'll be unlikely to lose money on the deal. Or you can rent.

Many of the best state schools are church-run. Luckily for parents with wobbly faith (or a cynical lack of it) such schools are no longer allowed to interview.

The government is constantly trying to change the rules to prevent such game-playing. One threat is to penalise university applicants on their parents' educational background as well as their own. Getting round that will be tricky: "Sophie, 17, seeks kind, preferably working-class foster parents to see her through university admission and help her shed the disadvantages of her middle-class origins. No graduates need apply."

The Economist, October 9th, 2004.