

Story: Private education

Page 3. Elite private schools

The elite private schools, generously funded, set in spacious grounds, well-equipped and -housed, their pupils immaculately uniformed, are the best-known aspect of private education.

A few of the elite schools were set up in the early colonial period – Christ’s College and Wanganui Collegiate, for example, opened in the 1850s – but most of those operating in the 2000s opened their doors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In some instances the schools went through a number of incarnations – Wellesley College in Eastbourne, for example, opened as the Croydon Preparatory School for Boys in 1914, became the Wellington Diocesan School Days Bay in 1919, then Wellesley in 1940. Changes of ownership accompanied each name change.

Princely imprimatur

The link between the English upper class and the elite private schools was given the royal family’s seal of approval in 1982, when Prince Edward spent six months tutoring at Wanganui Collegiate before going to the University of Cambridge. Although the prince avoided media attention, spending his time teaching, visiting friends and tramping, his presence was an acknowledgement of the school’s elite position.

The schools were in some cases a conscious attempt to recreate the English class system or nurture an elite. The early schools, for example, were based on exclusive English schools such as Eton and Rugby (known as ‘public schools’ in the UK). Many were boarding schools, used by well-to-do rural families instead of the local high schools. Such aims ran counter to New Zealand’s strong egalitarian tradition, and a reaction to ‘snob schools’ was a factor in delaying government funding until the late 1930s.

Academic and sporting competition

Students at elite private schools did markedly better in national exams than the average. Dissatisfaction with the NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) system meant that in the 2000s many of the schools also offered the Cambridge and International Baccalaureate exams.

Funding

Elite schools’ funding has come from fees, endowments, fundraising by parents, and the government.

Fees charged in 2010 were generally in the \$14,000 to \$18,000 range; boarding charges almost doubled this to \$30,000 to \$34,000 per year. The schools benefited from the success of their

students and from loyalty to a school demonstrated through endowments. In some instances schools were endowed by a founder or the government.

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