

## LETTER TO THE ECONOMIST

Dear Sir / Madam

I was disappointed to read your articles on low cost private schools on 1<sup>st</sup> August. Your banner headline of \$1 a week school is misleading as these schools invariably charge double or triple that much in practice. This may still sound cheap to us but for a family with 3 or 4 children living on a dollar day that is their full income (before eating any food).

These schools do not help to extend access to the 58 million children still out of school. Rather they attract children (especially boys) with supportive parents who can afford to pay, taking them out of government schools (where they would have done just as well). When research properly controls for the socio-economic status of parents, these schools make almost no difference to children's learning (see for example the *Rigorous Research Review on the Role and Impact of Private Schools, DFID et al 2014*). It is an old but clever trick – to attract the students who will do better and then claim that your school has made the difference. In practice it is often a con, cheating relatively poor parents of much needed income.

There are major challenges in improving the quality of government schools around the world but there are no great mysteries about how to do it. We need well-trained teachers working with manageable class sizes in accountable schools. In future I hope that the Economist will give equal coverage to the important work being done around the world by ActionAid and many others in this regard - rather than championing a distracting trend that is driven more by ideology than evidence.

Yours

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