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Editor, The Economist
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6 August 2015

RE: Leader “The \$1-a-week school”; Briefing “Learning unleashed” (1 August 2015)

Dear Madam/Sir,

As someone interviewed for nearly two hours for the articles on low-fee private schooling, I am dismayed and surprised by the lack of nuance.

My response is based on a global review of the evidence as among the first researchers working on this sector, and also the one who coined the term, ‘low-fee private’ schooling.

On affordability, we must ask, “*affordable for whom*”? The evidence in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is clear. Where households in the bottom quintiles have to pay direct out-of-pocket costs, sustained access suffers, particularly for girls and disadvantaged children. This has serious equity implications.

On achievement, the evidence is mixed. *No study consistently shows private school advantages* for all groups of private school students, in every context, in every subject. Differences in achievement are reduced, and sometimes disappear, when background characteristics are controlled for (parents’ education, income, private tuition, etc.). In the leader you cite an Indian study (presumably an ASER report) on low learning achievement. Yet, you fail to explicate that the same ASER studies show that actual learning levels in government *and private* schools are poor overall. In fact, the 2009 ASER study shows that in certain states (Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu) controlled differences showed *a negative association between private school attendance and local language learning*.

On cost-effectiveness, evidence is weak. Government subsidies to private schools for taxes, land grants, or scholarship or textbook support (where these exist) are not accounted for. The cost of public sector infrastructure (e.g., access to roads, electricity, water) is not factored in. Research shows that most private schools that stay open over time are based in relatively better-served locations. Finally, all studies show that ‘low-fee’ schools keep their costs low by hiring less qualified, lesser-paid teachers (certainly below the government scale and sometimes below the minimum wage), and younger women “as they are the cheapest source of labor” (Andrabi et al., 2008, p. 331).

Finally, my research on ancillary service providers is framed to suggest that it supports the expansion of private provision (Leader, final para). In fact, I was clear that evidence in this area is in its infancy and it is premature to draw such conclusions.

Sincerely,

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Associate Professor

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