

Arts bodies urged to rethink pricing and access policies as campaign challenges use of state vs independent school labels

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Following widespread national media coverage of access policies at the Royal Academy of Music, a new national campaign, informed by research and feedback from parents, warns the issue is far from isolated and calls for a more constructive, evidence-based approach to pricing and access beyond state vs independent school labels.

A national campaign has been launched calling on arts and cultural organisations to rethink pricing and access policies that differentiate between pupils based on whether they attend state or independent schools. The campaign, led by the Association for Families of Independent Schooling (AFIS), argues that using school type as a proxy for disadvantage is an imprecise approach and is urging organisations to adopt more accurate, needs-based ways of identifying and supporting those who may otherwise miss out.

The move follows recent coverage of the Royal Academy of Music's foundation programme, which restricts applications to students from state-funded schools. AFIS says this reflects a wider and growing pattern across the arts and cultural sector, rather than isolated cases.

According to AFIS, some organisations are:

- Charging independent school groups significantly higher prices for identical educational experiences
- Restricting access to programmes based solely on school background

In some cases, AFIS says the difference in pricing can exceed 50 per cent per pupil for the same tickets.

The organisation argues that such policies can create unintended distortions, with some higher-income pupils qualifying for support based on school type, while others with genuine need are excluded.

AFIS says it has heard from a number of families whose children have been excluded from opportunities under these policies, with parents describing concern at the approach and disappointment felt by their children. One parent told AFIS their child, who attends an independent school on a fully means-tested bursary, was unable to access an arts programme because eligibility was limited to state schools.

Michelle Daniells, Founder and CEO of AFIS, said:

“Efforts to widen access to the arts are important, but using school type as a shortcut for disadvantage is a blunt and misleading approach. It risks shutting out children who genuinely need support, while reinforcing assumptions about families based on the school their child attends.”

AFIS says assumptions about income and school type are often inaccurate. Its analysis suggests there are around four times as many children from the highest-income households in state schools as in independent schools, highlighting how school type is a poor proxy for need.

“These policies divide children based on labels they did not choose,” Daniells added. “If we are serious about improving access and opportunity, support needs to be accurately targeted and based on real circumstances, not institutional categories.”

AFIS says it has identified a potential solution that would allow support to be targeted more fairly and consistently across all children, using a means-tested approach based on individual circumstances rather than school type. The organisation believes this would provide a more accurate and effective way of identifying need.

AFIS says it is keen to work constructively with arts organisations, policymakers and sector bodies to explore how such an approach could be implemented in practice.

AFIS says the issues identified extend beyond the arts sector, including into areas such as work

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experience, outreach and aspects of recruitment practices. The organisation is keen to work with partners across sectors, including public bodies and government departments, to explore how more accurate and consistent approaches could be applied more widely.

The organisation is calling on arts and cultural bodies to:

- Review pricing and access policies
- End the use of school type as a basis for differential treatment
- Adopt more accurate, needs-based approaches to identifying need

The campaign forms part of AFIS's wider work, **Beyond School Labels: Rethinking School Labels**, which aims to move beyond binary classifications and focus on the real drivers of opportunity and disadvantage.

The petition can be viewed and signed here:

<https://afis.org.uk/petition>

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