



Open Access: Democratising entry to Independent Day Schools

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Foreword

Social mobility has many dimensions. Much of the attention, rightly, focuses on the long tail of underachievement in the British education system, which denies too many disadvantaged children the basic building blocks to go on to further education and jobs. Through the Sutton Trust, and now that the Trust has established the Education Endowment Foundation, we are spending over £200m in the next fifteen years on addressing this most important problem.

But we should not lose sight of the top end: the low social mobility in the highest echelons of our society, reflected in the make-up of our leading universities and most coveted and influential careers. Addressing this issue – and challenging the many vested interests which prevent progress - has long been a priority of the Sutton Trust. An important part of the solution lies in programmes to raise the aspirations of non-privileged youngsters towards university through summer schools and outreach work, and by giving them access to the professions through initiatives such as work placements and mentoring. But we also need to look earlier on in the education cycle, to what is happening to foster the talent of bright non-privileged young people in their school years. That is where this important and timely paper comes in.

This report argues for Open Access to independent day schools, which are the

pipeline to elite universities and the professions. We have a rich history in this country of providing access to such schools: before 1976 through the direct grant and other schemes, 70 percent of independent day schools were principally state funded, during what was the golden age of social mobility at the top. Rather than a theoretical discussion about the merits of various schemes, this report is a proposal for a practical way to move forward to help the very brightest pupils, regardless of their ability to pay. The paper builds on our experience at the Belvedere Girls' School, Liverpool, where together with Girls Day School Trust, we ran an Open Access scheme with outstanding results.

As this paper highlights, we have proved the case for Open Access in educational, social and economic terms, and already have the backing of over 80 of the top independent day schools in the country. We cannot afford to waste talent: not only is it manifestly unfair, but work undertaken by the Boston Consulting Group showed that improved social mobility would add a conservatively estimated four percent to our GDP.

Supporting Open Access and working to improve provision in the state sector, which the Trust has been doing for the last fifteen years, are not mutually exclusive. It is not an either / or issue – we need to do both. So now is the right time to take a decisive step to once and for all make available, on merit alone, the outstanding provision independent day schools have to offer.

Sir Peter Lampl

Chairman, The Sutton Trust, Chairman, The Education Endowment Foundation

Executive Summary

Unlike other advanced countries Britain has a two-nation education system in which the seven percent of young people in fee-paying schools enjoy unrivalled opportunities and outcomes. Social mobility in Britain declined for those born in the 1970s compared to those born in the 1950s, and the evidence suggests it is now flat at best, at a level lower than almost any other advanced nation. The main driver of this is inequality of educational opportunity. Results of international comparisons reveal that the brightest ten percent of state school students at age 15 are 1.1 years of schooling behind their private school counterparts – a gap which is bigger than in other countries.

One only has to glance at the lower teacher ratios and the higher qualifications of teachers in the independent sector to see the advantages that fee-paying schools enjoy. Partnerships between the two sectors, which the Sutton Trust pioneered, as well as new moves under the academies and free schools policies, may help blur the divide, but they do not overcome it.

The conundrum for policy-makers is that private schools have every right to exist and individuals every right to choose them. The solutions most frequently suggested are often impractical. Independent schools cannot be abolished. University entrance quotas are politically difficult. Bursary schemes, while welcome, only scratch the surface of the problem, sector-wide. And, it is highly unlikely that any independent school will have its charitable status withdrawn. The impracticality of these and other proposals makes for an

often spurious debate, the result of which is the maintenance of the status quo.

The Sutton Trust has for the last 15 years worked to improve standards in state schools and the majority of its research, policy and project work supports students in state schools, particularly those working in the most challenging circumstances. It supports the pupil premium and efforts to increase the status of the teaching profession. It was recently awarded £125m by government as the lead charity, with support from Impetus, to set up and manage the Education Endowment Foundation, which will fund, develop and evaluate projects to improve the attainment of children on free school meals in the most challenging schools. But it does not believe the public/private gap can be overcome by confining efforts to the state school side of the divide. And working with state schools does not – and should not – preclude working with the independent sector.

Open Access is a voluntary scheme that would open the best independent day schools to talented children from all backgrounds. Eighty of the top independent day schools in the country have already agreed in principle to Open Access. They would remain independent; entrance would be competitive; and fees would be paid on a sliding scale according to means. Open Access is not an extension of the Assisted Places Scheme, since opening 100% of the places would fundamentally change the social structure of the schools. Nor is it a simple return to the Direct Grant system, as the Open Access funding model is much more efficient, with only those who need support receiving it.

A seven year pilot scheme at Belvedere School, Liverpool, funded by the Sutton Trust and the Girls' Day School Trust, the school's owners, exceeded expectations. With nearly three-quarters of the girls qualifying for assistance with fees (including a third on free places), it had a wide social mix, academic standards went up, the opening up of the school was locally applauded and it was a happy place to teach and learn.

The benefits of opening 100 or so top independent day schools would transcend the numbers involved. Because the cost would be shared between parents and the Government, the average cost to the government would be less than the full cost of a state school place.

Objections to the scheme can be convincingly answered, notably accusations of selection: selection already takes place in these schools, on a social and cash as well as academic basis, whereas Open Access would be entirely meritocratic. Open Access would therefore not be increasing selection, merely democratising selection and entry. For the first time, the children of the 90 percent of parents who cannot afford full fees would have an opportunity to go to the best academic schools in the country. Because the scheme is aimed at the very brightest pupils – less than one percent of the cohort, who often get lost in the comprehensive system – there would be no negative impact on the state sector. Yet the initiative would transform the pipeline of talent to the elite universities and professions.

An Open Access, needs blind approach to admissions is how the top American universities – the highest ranked in the world – select and admit students. There is no

question of dumbing-down or compromising standards; it is about making the very best use of the nation's talent. At about half of 1% of the education budget, the cost of this important new departure would be relatively small, but it would be the most powerful single policy step in opening up the elites and improving social mobility at the top of our society.

Open Access is not a cure-all but a vital new dimension to the Government's strategy of diversity and independence, which fits well with its other education policies. Public opinion would welcome the involvement of independent schools in the national educational effort and the breaking down of barriers of exclusivity. Polling work shows that the use of Government funds to enable children to attend independent schools is supported by the general public by a margin of 3:1 and over half the parents in the country would like to send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so.

Other countries are much better at developing their talent. In an increasingly competitive world we cannot afford to waste talent when faced by the competitive challenges of India and China. Work by the Boston Consulting Group showed that improved social mobility would add a conservatively estimated four percent to our GDP, reflecting the economic impact of a better educated workforce.

The Problem

The divide between state and private education in Britain remains as topical as ever – and the need for a coherent solution remains as pressing. Scarcely a day passes without some reference in the media to the gap between Britain's state and independent schools. Whether it is examination results, university access, internships and work placements, few subjects arouse such political and private passions.

For all this, little changes. Rarely has public consciousness of the issue been so high – but discussion of serious solutions remains inadequate. It is almost universally agreed that there is an issue, but there is no practical, system-wide solution in place which goes to the heart of the matter – and, as a consequence, nothing changes.

Every country has its educational headaches. What distinguishes the British system from that of other advanced countries is the starkness of the divide between state and independent schools. Only in Britain are the most successful academic schools in the country closed to the vast majority of its citizens, however able. In terms of facilities, teacher qualifications, staff/pupil ratios and performance and career prospects, the gap between independent and state schools is vast. There are, of course, state schools achieving outstanding results, often in challenging circumstances – and the independent sector is far from homogenous – but the overall picture is depressingly consistent. No objective observer can deny that this division undermines efforts at improving social mobility, yet no political party

has any policy which addresses this fundamental issue of the divide between state and independent schools.

For all the reforms under Labour, and now the Coalition, to make state schools less uniform and more competitive, the stark differences in outcomes remain. We are only able to judge the impact of academies and free schools once they are scaled-up, but the increase in government spending appears to have done little to improve the relative performance of state educated children. The persistence of the divide, and its consequences for our schools and society, are frequently noted by foreign observers of the British scene, and by expatriates returning home. An OECD report has noted that the gap in achievement between state and private schools in England is the biggest in the Western world, and that seems likely to remain the case. An analysis for the Sutton Trust of the 2010 PISA international comparisons reveals that the brightest ten percent of state school students at age 15 are 1.1 years of schooling behind their private school counterparts.

The educational advantages enjoyed by affluent families – most glaringly illustrated in higher education – are not seen to the same degree in any other advanced country. The chance of getting into one of the top dozen universities is vastly increased for those from independent schools. One third of the students admitted to Oxbridge, for instance, come from the top 100 schools – 3% of secondary schools as a whole, 84 of which are independent schools. The second large slice of the remaining places is taken by grammar schools, socially-selective faith schools and comprehensives in wealthy areas, meaning

that the share of places taken by the 80 percent of remaining state schools is shamefully low.

Adjustments to university admissions systems, including the taking into account of context in admissions decisions, cannot be the whole answer, important as they are. The problem arises earlier, in schools, and any definitive cure must be there. The benefits of a private education are life-long and, in terms of guaranteeing a successful career, are greater than decades ago, when grammar and direct grant schools posed a challenge to the independent sector.

A study by the London School of Economics funded by the Sutton Trust showed that social mobility in Britain had actually declined for those born in the Seventies compared to those born in the late Fifties, a fact observable in everyday life: the prevalence of privately educated people in positions of influence or authority in the professional, entertainment or sporting world is extraordinary, bearing in mind they make up just 7% of the school population. There may be controversy about whether social mobility is declining or whether we are standing still, but no one suggests there has been sufficient progress – one reason why the theme of fairness is on the lips of every political leader.

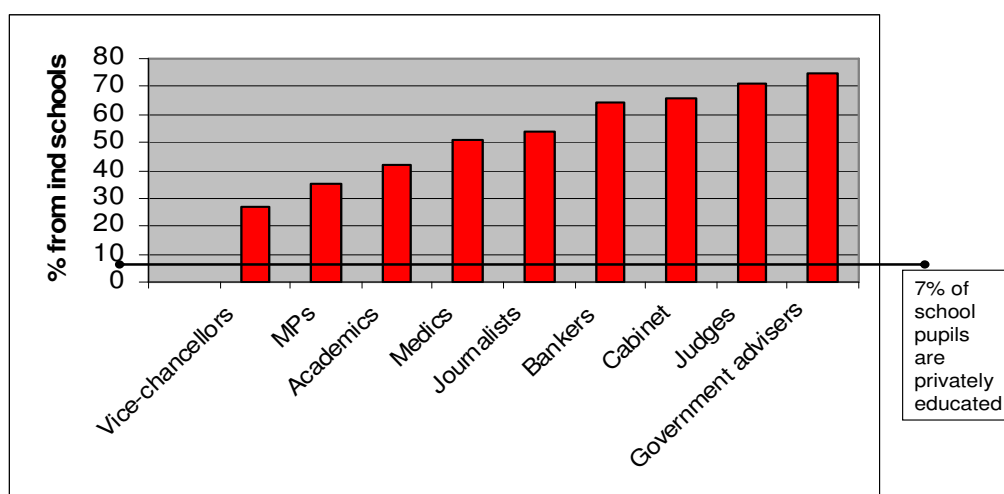
The newspaper editor who decides what goes into your paper, the BBC employee who conceives programmes or reads the news, the NHS specialist you go to, the solicitor you hire,

the politician you vote for – all are likely to have been educated in the private sector.

Two broad reasons, the LSE academics believed, accounted for the decline in social mobility in Britain. One was the large growth in income differentials, which means that there is simply a bigger gap for the less well-off to jump. But the chief cause of this fall was that the expansion of educational opportunities over these years has disproportionately benefited better-off families. The rapid expansion of higher education over the period in question was, for example, concentrated amongst people from higher income backgrounds. The LSE study also looked at how Britain's social mobility levels compared with other countries. The researchers concluded that, along with the US, the UK has the lowest levels of mobility for any advanced nation for which there is data.

Studies by the Sutton Trust have confirmed that senior positions in the legal profession, the media, politics, the judiciary, the City and the upper echelons of the Civil Service are filled disproportionately by those from private schools. And it is not just the more traditional professions: many of the country's successful young actors, TV presenters, writers, film and now even pop stars and comedians have enjoyed the benefits of independent education.

School backgrounds of professions



It is certainly true that an independent education can help build confidence. At a time when the economy depends more than ever before on so-called “soft skills” – social and communication skills, physical and psychological characteristics or even dress sense and leisure activities – these attributes can count as much as formal educational attainment. The social ease, manners, articulacy, persuasiveness and debating skills that employers and admissions tutors report as being more prevalent amongst the independently-educated, reinforce the advantage these young people have in securing places at top universities and in the job market.

The prevalence of independently-educated students at leading universities also facilitates networking, of which we have seen a massive expansion, notably in these hard economic times. The controversy over interns makes the point neatly. The practice is universal, its

defenders say, extending from the public-school editor who awards an internship to the son of a friend, to the bartender who puts a job as a bar girl in the way of an unemployed acquaintance, or family member. But what matters in the context of social mobility is that a networking of this “each to his own” variety forms part of a system that tends to prevent the bar girl from aspiring to a media career in the first place.

None of this has anything to do with “anti-elitism.” In a functioning meritocracy the dominance of Oxbridge and other leading universities would be natural, since they would be genuinely open to all. But the same cannot be said of the dominance of the independent schools that at present disproportionately feed them.

International competition is also sharpening. How long will Britain be able to recruit its elites from a narrow section of society and maintain

its position in the world, whether in the economic, educational or cultural fields, must be open to doubt. How will the mathematicians, engineers, managers or business people of these small islands perform when confronted with the resurgent cultures of Asia, several billion strong?

A nation that will be increasingly obliged to live off its wits rather than the past cannot afford the social exclusivity associated with that past.

Work by the Boston Consulting Group showed that improved social mobility would add an estimated four percent to our GDP, which reflects the economic impact of a better educated workforce. We must recognise and nurture the talents of young people wherever they are to be found, in physics as well as fashion.

The Policy Conundrum

Independent schools have every legal and moral right to exist, and many are first-class educational institutions. There are many excellent schools in the state sector too, which perform well with their mixed-ability intake and sometimes limited facilities and resources. All that needs to be done, it may therefore be said, is to generalise best practice and bring the levels of the lower performing schools up to the average of the best in the country, independent or state.

In our view things are less simple. While every effort should be made to spread best practice and the most effective strategies for learning – something which the Sutton Trust is spearheading through the Education Endowment Foundation – we also need to recognize that education is not a science, it is a culture. It is not simply a question of providing sufficient equipment, personnel, premises and managerial staff for schools to succeed. Widely different cultures and philosophies are involved, about what should be studied, at what age, where and how. Everyone agrees how hip-joint operations should be performed, but in schools there is not even a consensus about how to teach the alphabet.

There is bold talk of making our state schools world class; some claim that we are getting there, though the statistics suggest there is a long way to go. To achieve “world class” schools with a system divided on social grounds is unimaginable. In independent day schools the resources are far greater than those in the state sector (This paper leaves boarding schools to one side, since they

account for less than one percent of the school population and the price of opening them up – with fees of £30,000 a year - would be unaffordable). Yet it is not just numbers: nowhere does quality matter more than in teaching, and here too independent schools often enjoy a great advantage.

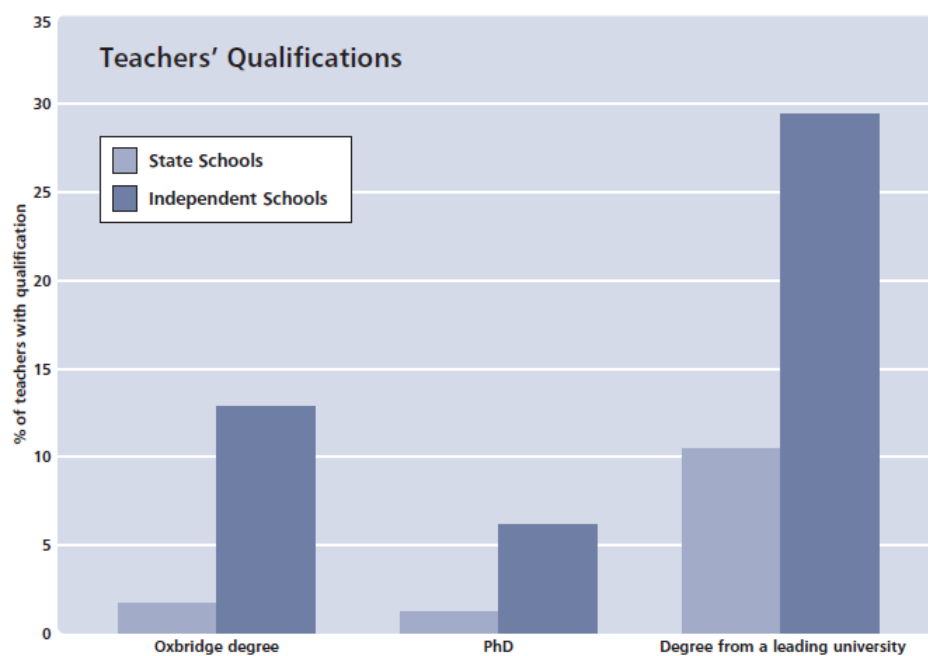
A study by Professor Alan Smithers at Buckingham University and commissioned by the Sutton Trust, revealed that teachers in independent schools are seven times more likely to have graduated from Oxbridge, and five times more likely to have a PhD. More pertinently, teachers in the independent sector are far more likely to have a degree in the subject they are teaching, especially in shortage subjects such as maths, physics, design and technology. Of course, raw qualifications are not everything – but recruiting a disproportionate share of highly able individuals, with deep subject knowledge, has to be an advantage. Is it right that the children of the wealthiest 7 percent of society should benefit so disproportionately from their services?

Nor can we take comfort from suggestions that students on bursaries form a high percentage of independent pupils overall. Based on data provided by the Independent Schools Council and follow up research, our best estimate is that something like 3% to 4% of fee income, sector wide, is spent on means-tested bursaries with a slightly lower proportion (3%) spent on scholarships. Scholarships are not means tested, for less than 50% of fees and usually go to bright children whose parents can afford to pay for prep schools and full fees. Bursaries, meanwhile, have to provide for

independent school parents who fall on hard times and the schools' own teachers, so very little is left for children who need more than half of their fees paying.

So while there are some independent schools which provide significant bursaries, well in excess of the figures above, some do very little - often for basic reasons of affordability. The

fact is that, for all practical purposes, independent schools are closed to the 90 percent or more of parents who cannot afford the fees. Instead of closing our eyes to it, or inflating the significance of schemes that mitigate its effects at the margin, it is time we faced up to the issue squarely, in a constructive way.



Proposed Solutions

The purpose of this paper is not to rehearse familiar issues, but to put forward realistic answers. Despite the amount of debate on the state/independent school divide, there is a lack of practical proposals on how to tackle it fundamentally.

University entrance quotas

The Sutton Trust believes that contextual factors – and potential as well as achievement - should be taken into account when determining which students get university places. This would not reduce the quality of UK universities as top American universities – which account for 17 of the 20 highest ranked institutions in the world – put much weight on contextual factors. But a rigid system of quotas would be seen as a punitive measure discriminating against talent and effort, whether in private or successful state schools. It is also a sticking-plaster solution to a much deeper, more fundamental problem arising from inequalities in the school system. The issue must be tackled from both perspectives: the school and university admissions ends.

Removing charitable status

It is reasonable to ask, as both Labour and the Coalition have begun doing, how independent schools justify their charitable status. Yet it is highly unlikely that any independent school will have its charitable status withdrawn or be forced to make significant changes to their activities by the Charity Commission – particularly after the recent ruling in the High Court that independent schools do not have to provide bursaries (even though many will continue to do so). Having to demonstrate

public benefit may alter some schools' activities at the margins, but it will not bring about any fundamental change.

Means testing and bursaries

Schemes by which the independent sector offers some places to pupils on a means-tested basis, to be paid for by parental contributions, philanthropic income or a contribution from the schools, have been proposed in various forms. These are essentially a variant of the Assisted Places Scheme, and – while laudable in their own terms - would suffer from much the same defects and objections, with only a small minority of places available. It would not be “Open Access” in the sense the Sutton Trust understands the term: i.e. access to all places based on merit alone.

Academy sponsorship and partnership working

Good work is being done to bring the two sectors closer together through partnerships, and the Sutton Trust has itself supported many such schemes. The merits of independent schools sponsoring academies are less clear as their expertise does not lie in addressing some of the challenges that schools in the most deprived areas face. There are also some interesting free school models on the horizon, with independent schools involved in a range of ways. But none of these measures actually overcome the divide: none will lead to the systematic opening up of independent schools so that low and middle income students can benefit *directly* from their teaching, their facilities and their ethos.

Vouchers

Some have argued that parents should be allowed to use the equivalent of state spending on their children in the form of a voucher to buy them an independent education. With vouchers the pool of parents willing to pay would expand, and new independent schools would be created to cater for demand. Flat-rate vouchers would be most attractive for those who could find the £5,000 or so to top it up. But there would be consequences for the rest, as more parents left the state system, leaving the least affluent behind. An expansion of the paying independent sector would merely

consolidate the two-tier system, while doing little to open up independent education to the least affluent.

Surveying the ideas on offer, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that few of them are workable proposals or would have the system-wide impact we need. This is damaging in itself, since it engenders an unserious debate, whose result is the maintenance of the status quo. The notion that radical new ideas are in the air and that “something is being done” systematically is a false impression.

Government Policy

On independent schools the Coalition, like Labour before it, has no viable strategy. On the one hand it hopes that reforms in the maintained sector, notably the Academy and free schools movements, will gradually bridge the gap in achievement. On the other, it is bringing pressures to bear, notably in university admissions and by encouraging co-operation between the two sectors. The Sutton Trust supports the search for measures to improve standards in maintained schools. This is the key area in which the Sutton Trust has been working for the last 15 years and now, through the Education Endowment Foundation, we are spending over £200m on projects to help the poorest children in the most challenging schools.

But The Sutton Trust is pragmatic too, and working on one side of the divide is not sufficient. Academies and free schools are new departures that must prove their worth over time. It would take massive resources and decades of effort for schools in all parts of the country to improve to the point where there was no significant advantage in attending independent schools – if it could ever be done, particularly during times of austerity.

Teachers are critical and a large proportion of the best qualified are in independent schools and are unlikely to make the switch to the state sector. There are individual examples of first-rate private school teachers crossing the line, but many more able teachers move in the opposite direction. Schemes to raise the status of the teaching profession have helped, as have flagship projects to attract bright graduates into the profession. But, as the

Sutton Trust study on Teacher Qualifications suggests, as a private sector employer responsive to the market, the independent schools can be relied upon to ensure that they continue to disproportionately attract the very best in the field.

Nor do attempts to introduce more choice at secondary level seem likely to benefit those from poorer homes as much as those further up the income ladder. It is not just low expectations, cultural background or “the pushy middle classes” monopolizing choice that determine outcomes, powerful as those factors are: seemingly mundane things like the non-availability of school transport can be a serious barrier. A study by the Boston Consulting Group carried out for the Sutton Trust showed that whilst the better-off were well placed to take advantage of more variegated schools, the least well-off tended to stay put: children from the top 20 percent of income travel on average two and a half miles to school, while the bottom 20 percent travel just over one mile.

In light of all the above - and despite the efforts of many state schools working against the odds – for a range of reasons, there is very little chance for the dramatic leap necessary to bring average state sector results to the same as the independents.

If competition from the state sector is stepped up, it is highly likely that the independent sector will be sufficiently flexible and imaginative to match it. Constraints on government expenditure, meanwhile, will not help close the gap in resources: while state class sizes have crept up, fees at independent schools have risen to pay for ever-improving

modern facilities, for example in science and technology, to continue to improve staff/ pupil ratios, and to recruit and retain the best qualified teachers.

The gap could grow in other ways. There has been a tendency for independent schools to start their own junior schools, as well as a pattern of growth in private nursery schools. Assuming they are not reversed by economic recession, the effect of such trends would be to polarize state and private education further, as increasing numbers of independently educated pupils have no contact with their state schooled peers from their nursery days through to university.

In terms of university access, the Sutton Trust has been involved in this field for 15 years, with some notable success, particularly through funding summer schools and outreach programmes. A good deal of the problem stems from the reluctance of appropriately-qualified state pupils to make applications in the first place, often because of misconceptions about leading universities and concerns about fitting-in. Sadly, these attitudes are reinforced by some state school teachers: our survey work shows, for example, that almost half of comprehensive school teachers say they would not encourage their brightest students to apply to Oxbridge.

The key to a sensible policy on university access is the recognition that, while there is much to do in opening the doors of higher education wider, and raising the aspirations of students and teachers, the root problem lies in the under-achievement of many state schools. While the gulf in average examination performance remains as large as it is, the

imbalance in admissions to the most prestigious institutions appears destined to continue. So while work to encourage talented comprehensive pupils to apply- and of encouraging universities to accept them - must continue, we should not forget that the central problem lies in schools.

Nothing in this paper should be read as implying that the problems of the British education system can be resolved simply by tackling the problems raised by independent schools. That is far from our position. The Sutton Trust is not merely engaged at the elite end of the educational spectrum, but at all stages in the process, from pre-school programmes through to university summer schools. That is one reason we welcome our appointment by the Secretary of State as the lead charity with support from Impetus in setting up the Education Endowment Foundation, with £125m of state funding and also chaired by Sir Peter Lampl. We see the problems at all levels of schooling as inextricably intertwined. Without tackling the fundamental problem of our two educational cultures we do not see how progress overall can be assured. It seems to us prudent, therefore, to work from both ends of the divide to bridge the gap.

The Open Access Scheme

The principles of the scheme proposed by the Sutton Trust for involving the independent sector in the national educational effort while maintaining its independence are, we hope, broadly familiar. The Trust demonstrated its confidence in them by establishing a pilot scheme in partnership with The Girls' Day School Trust at The Belvedere School in Liverpool which ran for seven years. The essentials of the scheme are:

- Independent day schools that are at present open only to those who can pay the fees (some bursaries apart) would be opened to all on a means-tested basis. Membership of the Open Access sector would be voluntary, though only schools of sufficient academic quality would be admitted. The only pressure on schools to join would come as a result of their desire to educate able children from all backgrounds, not just the well-off, and their need to compete with a new, dynamic sector which, being open to all, would draw on a wider pool of talent than current independent schools.
- The schools joining the scheme would retain their independence. This would be a precondition of opening up: if they did not continue to control, for example, their intake, syllabus and teacher recruitment, few if any schools would volunteer for change. Given that state funds would be involved, there would be a need for monitoring performance through a light touch regime.
- Admittance would be competitive, but the system of selection would be far more sophisticated than the old eleven-plus. Fees for successful applicants would be charged on a sliding scale, with the richest paying full fees, shading off to the poorest, who would pay nothing. Assessment would take account of parents' assets, as well as income. In this and other respects it would be stricter and more efficient than the system used for the Assisted Places Scheme, and would be informed by the lessons learnt from the Belvedere pilot.
- The size of the shortfall in the school's fee income would depend on its success in recruiting pupils from less privileged backgrounds. In practice each school would vary according to its catchment area, with schools close to areas of disadvantage likely to require more funded places. Basing our calculations on experience at the Belvedere School, we would estimate that pupils needing some level of funding would be approximately two-thirds of the cohort, which would translate into approximately 50% of the fees requiring funding. The shortfall in fee income would come from the state and would be less per capita than a state school place.

- We have provisionally assessed the cost of opening up 100 top performing day schools, comprising 62,000 pupils, at a rounded figure of £11,000 fees per pupil, per year. Assuming all agreed to participate over time, and 50% of the fees were paid by the state, the cost would start at £49 million per year and eventually reach some £340 million, when the scheme is fully operational nationally.
- On the basis that state places work out at around £6,000 per pupil, including capital expenditure, on a full cost basis, and that one-third of the vacated places in state schools are taken by “displaced” private pupils, the total cost would shrink to £180 million assuming full cost savings. In practice this saving could manifest itself by freeing resources in the state sector.

It is important to underline what the above means in terms of securing political and public support. The cost of each place would in effect be shared between paying parents and the state. As a result of this partnership the average net price to the Treasury for each child attending a distinguished, well-equipped independent day school would be approximately £5,500 - less than a state school place.

In fact, we know that the Open Access approach would be well received by the public and by parents. Polling for the Independent Schools Information Service (ISIS) has shown that the use of state funds to enable children to attend independent schools was supported by a margin of 3:1. And according to a MORI

survey commissioned by the Sutton Trust, over half the parents in the country would be likely to send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so. Open Access would bring that option within the reach of all families in the country.

Comparisons with other schemes

It helps to define what we mean by Open Access if we make it clear what it is *not*: a simple return to the direct grant system or to the Assisted Places Scheme (APS).

Insofar as there are similarities with the old direct grant system, this is a positive; in its time it served as a “third way” between state schools and the private sector, and many successful people in society today from less privileged backgrounds are products of the direct grant system. The quality of the schools can not be in doubt: many of the best performing independent day schools were formerly direct grant schools. And one reason that many independent schools are interested in Open Access status is that they have a tradition of educating bright children irrespective of their parents’ ability to pay fees.

But times change, and the Sutton Trust has no interest in merely setting the clock back. The principle of private/ public co-operation once enshrined in the direct grant system must be democratised and taken forward. There is a substantial difference between these schools as they were and what the Trust is proposing.

According to Volume II of the Second Report of the Public Schools Commission, there were 175 direct grant schools in England in 1970. Over the whole system, 61% of pupils paid no

fees, 11% paid part fees, and 28% paid full fees. There was no means test so many of those who paid no fees at all came from families who could afford to, and those who paid full fees were admitted at a lower standard than the others. Hence the indeterminate status of the schools and their qualified success as a vehicle for promoting educational meritocracy.

Our proposal for 100% Open Access to independent schools would provoke a qualitative as well as a quantitative change, transforming the whole nature of the schools. In keeping with a more modern ethos it would exclude all remnants of social and financial privilege and exclusivity.

The differences between Open Access and the Assisted Places Scheme are even more fundamental. Those selected under the Assisted Places Scheme were not invariably the brightest, only 60% had to come from state

schools, and the scheme was misused to accommodate, for example, siblings. It did not take account of the financial assets of applicants, such as the value of their houses, only income; consequently the system was open to abuse. More fundamentally, the scheme did very little to diminish the state/private divide as it included a very limited number of places: in 1985 assisted places amounted to just 13% of the total at independent schools, much less than the direct grant system. We know from research by the Institute of Education and funded by the Sutton Trust that many of those on assisted places from genuinely disadvantaged backgrounds felt out of place and alienated, being the minority in an otherwise socially exclusive setting. Furthermore, a number of the schools within the Assisted Places Scheme were not of sufficient academic quality and so did little to improve the life chances of those who took up places.

The Belvedere Pilot

Unlike other proposed solutions, the Open Access scheme has been put to the test, and the results exceeded our expectations. The Belvedere School, an independent girls' school in Liverpool, was opened to all on a means tested basis in the academic year 2000 and the scheme ran for seven years so that the whole school was admitted under Open Access. The Belvedere is a former Direct Grant school, and member of the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST), which contributed both money and experience to the running and financing of the school together with the Sutton Trust. The fact that, after the end of the seven year pilot scheme, the school changed to Academy status was no reflection on its success as an Open Access independent school.

The Belvedere was selected from a number of candidates for the pilot, partly for its geographical location, lying as it does close to areas which comprise a social and ethnic mix. To act as a true experiment it was essential that pupils of all backgrounds should be eligible to apply, and its catchment area in Liverpool extends as far as Warrington and Widnes, Rainhill and St Helens to the east and Crosby to the north.

In opening up an independent day school 100%, the Sutton Trust and the GDST were treading new territory. For all our efforts to ensure equal opportunity, we could not be sure pupils from the upper income bracket would not dominate the intake for familiar socio-cultural reasons. When Open Access was introduced, 70% of parents received fee assistance under strict means testing

arrangements. Parental occupations went across the whole socio-economic range. We were careful to advertise and promote the new opportunities as widely as possible, and the first effect of the opening up of the school was that the number of applications for places was up two and a half times, compared with the preceding year.

In the first year there were 367 applications for 72 places, compared to 130 before the scheme started. These applications included 25 from the Belvedere junior school and about the same from other independent schools. The rest came from state primaries. As a result, those awarded places were far more representative of the Merseyside population than in previous years. Many bright children were admitted whose parents would never previously have thought of applying because of their inability to pay the fees.

As an important part of the pilot an outreach officer was appointed, working from the school to visit state primaries, inform them of the new opportunities for their pupils, and seek to dispel prejudice or misconceptions. She was extraordinarily successful in prevailing on staff to encourage parents and children to apply for places. She also reported a low level of resistance to the Belvedere's recruitment policies amongst state primary teachers on the grounds that they were elitist.

The entry procedures were designed to assess not just past and current performance, but potential. And while care was taken to avoid positive discrimination, where other things were equal, some allowance was made for the type of school the applicant had attended and their home background. Verbal and non-

verbal reasoning tests were introduced in addition to English and mathematics papers, which were used as a cut off. An admissions committee consisting of three decided offers based on merit alone.

An annual independent evaluation of the school's operation was carried out by Professor Alan Smithers and Dr Pamela Robinson, now at Buckingham University. The question they set out to answer was: what impact is Open Access having on entry to the school in terms of ability and background? In particular, is it attracting very able children from low-income homes? The first study concluded that "even in its first year the scheme can be counted a success." Their report for the third year found that applications were received from 129 state schools, which provided 92% of the year's intake. Twenty-nine very able girls from the 111 applicants from the two poorest postcode categories were offered places, as were six of the 15 applicants from the multi-racial inner city.

Over 30% of those for whom the father's occupational status was available came from manual backgrounds, or were unemployed. About a third of the entrants had their fees fully paid by the Sutton Trust and the GDST, and a further 38 per cent had their fees partly covered. Comparison of the intake before and after Open Access showed that entries from middle and lower income postcodes increased appreciably. The proportion of the girls eligible for free school meals admitted in the five years of Open Access, at 33 percent, was more than double the national average of 15 percent.

The cost of the scheme naturally increased with its success. If the pilot scheme had failed,

and all those gaining entry based on merit had come from affluent families who were willing and able to pay fees, then the subsidy (other than the cost of the admissions procedure) would have been nil. But the success of the scheme made the cost, shared between the Sutton Trust and the Girls' Day School Trust, somewhat higher than anticipated. At maturity the scheme cost about £2 million annually.

Opening up the Belvedere School was well received locally, with so-called "creaming off" of talent from state schools not an issue. Around 10,000 pupils made the transition from primary to secondary each year in the Liverpool area, and 50 went on to The Belvedere. So, while the scheme had a huge impact on those who benefited, the fact that only half a percent of the local school aged population went to Belvedere meant there was no negative impact on the state sector.

Indeed the change of status was celebrated by the local media as progressive. This public reaction was especially heartening. It confirmed the Sutton Trust's view that, when the choice lies between an old-style independent school, and one that is seen to be an extension of choice for all, any qualms about selection take a back seat. The public evidently understands that, though the Belvedere remained independent, Open Access had changed the nature of the school. Local master classes for gifted children were also run by the Belvedere, which helped to open its doors more widely.

In 2005, the year the first Open Access cohort sat their GCSEs, the Belvedere School achieved its best ever results, becoming the top performer in Liverpool, with 99 per cent

achieving five good GCSEs compared with an average of 49 per cent across the schools of the LEA. The same cohort went on to gain exceptional A level results two years later and most entered top universities, including some to Oxbridge. Convincing proof of the success of the scheme and a vindication of the admissions policy.

Extending the model

The Trust is convinced that an extension of Open Access to other independent day schools is entirely feasible, and we believe it would fit naturally into Coalition policy. Open Access would complement and reinforce the Academy and free schools programmes, which themselves blur the divide between the independent and state sectors. The concept is similar in that both models involve independent schools being funded by the state, though in the case of Open Access, funding would be partial. Unlike Academies and free schools however, which often require large initial capital investment by the state, Open Access needs none. The schools are already there, usually with impressive facilities and

resources.

The Sutton Trust is proposing that the Government underwrites a scheme to offer 100 or so of the best performing independent day schools the chance to join a new, Open Access sector. As the figures outlined above, show, the cost per capita would be less than a state school place and, once savings in the state sector were accounted for, the overall cost would be in the region of £180 million a year – a tiny portion of the education budget.

Extensive soundings by the Sutton Trust, working with the former chair of HMC, David Levin, have revealed a high level of interest amongst a wide variety of schools all over the country in the proposal. The establishment of FIDS – The Federation of Independent Day Schools – has helped to represent the views of many of the former Direct Grant schools, but support for Open Access is not confined to them. Over 80 schools have now shown in principle support for going Open Access, with state support. The list includes many of the highest-performing day schools in the country.

Objections

Popular support would not prevent the scheme from coming under fire, but attacks could be convincingly rebutted:

The scheme is divisive and elitist

Answer: It would be far less divisive than the current system. All countries have elites. What matters is whether they are open or closed, hereditary or democratic, social elites or elites of ability, which Open Access would foster.

The scheme is selective

Answer: Independent schools are already selective, so there would be no increase in selection. To insist that selection of any kind must be reserved for people of means in the independent sector would be a curious position. Moreover independent schools would not co-operate on any other basis, and it is illusory to believe that non-selectivity could be imposed by law. If the choice is between opening them up and leaving them as they are, surely it is better to accept the element of selectivity?

Ideological objections to the chance to open up the independent sector will not be shared by the man or woman in the street. And if the Academy programme enjoys broad cross party support, why not an Open Access programme too? The scheme should be seen as democratising selection and entry to these schools.

The scheme is a disguised attack on the entire independent sector

Answer: Each school would be free to

enter as it wished. If some wished to back out after joining, that too would be up to them.

It is an attack on parents' freedom of choice, and how to spend their money

Answer: Nothing in the scheme would prevent the establishment of new independent schools, should there be a demand.

The problems of the British education system are not at the top, but at the middle and bottom

Answer: They are at all levels. Nothing in the scheme would conflict with the Government's strategies to improve performance at other levels, or from the Sutton Trust's and the Education Endowment Foundation's own work in state schools. It makes sense to tackle these problems in parallel and to recognise the particular 'stickiness' of British society at the top.

This is simply re-creating the grammar school system by another name

Answer: No, this is a new type of school, which of their nature will be limited in number. There is no comparison between a generalised selective system – where 25 percent went to grammar schools - and what we have in mind, where less than one percent of the most able will go to Open Access schools. We are not proposing new selective school places – simply the opening up of those which already exist, but which are available only to those who can afford fees.

It creams off talent from local state schools

Answer: In terms of absolute numbers the difference would be small. If Open Access was extended to 100 independent day schools, and 62,000 pupils, two thirds of whom would be former state sector students, the numbers switching to Open Access schools would account for less than one percent of the total school population. This is not a return to a selective system of education where a quarter of pupils went on to grammar schools; it is for the very brightest pupils who often get lost in the comprehensive system. The pilot project at Belvedere was well received by local schools.

Why should some pupils have more spent on them than others? The money would be better spent on improving the state system

Answer: More money has already been spent on the state system, in sums which dwarf what we are proposing. In discussions of affordability the key point is that the cost to the state would be less than a state school place. Many of those admitted who would have gone to state schools would only require partial state funding, due to funding by parents and to a lesser extent by the school and private donors. The cost over time would be a fraction of the total educational budget. In terms of helping to overcome a divide that is enormously costly in educational, economic and social terms, it is cheap at the price.

It would make no difference to the state/private divide. The well-off parents of children who failed to get in would simply place them in other independent schools.

Answer: That might well be their response. Parents would be at liberty to spend large sums on sending their children to less academic independent schools if they wanted. But it would no longer buy their children places at the best universities, or give them a leg up in their future careers, or prevent the most able children from having access to the best education.

The Government should look for other ways of achieving the same objective

Answer: Despite decades of rhetoric, no practicable alternative schemes for overcoming the state/ private divide have been forthcoming. Objectors are in effect arguing that the best policy is to do nothing.

The independent sector should itself fund such an initiative

There is no prospect whatever of private or philanthropic interests financing a significant number of schools. There are simply not enough potential donors ready for the long-term commitment involved, especially at this moment. To make an independent day school truly needs blind on a sustainable basis would require an endowment of between £100 million and £300 million depending on the size, fee level and catchment area.

Conclusion

The Sutton Trust is convinced that Open Access would represent a constructive alternative to a laissez-faire approach to independent schools on the one hand, and a punitive attitude on the other. The proposals would be seen as a fresh departure. They are in line with the best traditions of evolution rather than abrupt change, or no change at all. They would do much to break the log-jam over state and independent education that has for too long dammed up our educational potential, and most importantly they help release the talents of the entire country, with knock on effects on the make up of our universities and professions.

Our independent day schools are the best in the world. That is why increasing numbers of overseas parents pay for their children to go there. Is it fair that a national resource of this quality and importance should be the *de facto* preserve of a small section of society and of well-to-do foreigners? These schools have a long tradition of being open to all, with 70% being principally state funded before 1976 – a period of much higher mobility at the top. The schools have produced generations of distinguished people: scientists, politicians, writers, business people, actresses, sportsmen.

All the more reason to preserve and encourage them to do once again for the whole nation what they have, for the last 35 years, done for a privileged segment of it.