

Private schools laud 'open access' idea

Taxpayers would fund poorer pupils
Plan 'creams off' most able, say critics

By Helen Warrell, Public Policy Correspondent

A proposal that would see the taxpayer fund more than 40,000 poor children to attend private schools is gaining ground, as 90 independent schools said they would sign up if the scheme became policy after the next election.

St Paul's, a £19,000-a-year boys school that counts chancellor George Osborne among its former pupils, is the most prominent school so far to join the list of "open access" institutions.

Championed by social mobility charity the Sutton Trust, the plan has won support from the Conservative backbenches and campaigners are hopeful it could make its way into the party's 2015 manifesto.

Under the programme, the government would divert the average £6,000 spent on a pupil in the state system to a child from a lower income family enter-

ing an independent school. Since the estimated £180m a year public grant would not cover the full cost of the private school places, richer parents paying fees would provide cross-subsidy.

"I think it's an excellent idea; it is the most significant idea I have heard to enable independent schools to become more demo-

cratic," Mark Bailey, high master at St Paul's, told the Financial Times.

Describing the southwest London school as an "über-grammar, rather than a grand British public school", Prof Bailey also believes a "needs-blind" admissions system would bring St Paul's closer to the tenets of its 16th century founder, theologian John Colet.

"His founding vision was to create a school for children of all nations and backgrounds indifferently, in his phrase, and therefore it is at the core of the

school's [purpose]," Prof Bailey said.

Far from angering those who pay full fees, the high master says some parents, particularly those from the US, regularly donate bursary funds and are engaged in attempting to diversify the school's intake.

A similar assisted places scheme, brought in under Tory prime minister Margaret Thatcher, ran for almost two decades before it was abolished by Tony Blair.

While the Sutton Trust plan has been given short shrift by Labour politicians, who are opposed to academic selection in schools, it has the backing of Tories such as Graham Brady, the MP who chairs the party's 1922 backbench committee.

"Open access is a very good proposal. It would open places in some of the best schools in the country to children from all backgrounds and increase opportunities for many people

whose families are not in a position to pay for education," Mr Brady said.

He added that the places could help bridge the gap for parents who find their finances squeezed by austerity.

"With many families feeling the pressure in difficult economic times, if the quality of local state schools isn't good enough, it simply isn't an option to go private," he said.

However, it is exactly this tendency to top-up fees that

some families cannot fully afford that enrages opponents such as Fiona Millar, a campaigner and co-founder of the Local Schools Network.

"Realistically, it's the credit-crunched middle class parents who are most likely to get these places. We know from the grammar schools that where there is selection, it's only a handful of genuinely poor



pupils who get through," Ms Millar said.

"The political goal should be to create, as far as possible, evenly balanced comprehensive schools," Ms Millar added. "Finding more ways for private schools to cream off the most able pupils isn't the right way at all."

The Sutton Trust anticipated such criticisms, and a seven-year trial at an independent girls school in Liverpool subjected participating families to rigorous means testing.

Only parents with an income of less than £15,000 a year paid no fees at all, and those in the £15,000 to £45,000 bracket paid partial fees.

Household assets were also taken into account, to try to avoid middle-class families in large houses but with low incomes having an unfair advantage.

However, there is still an ideological barrier when it comes to applying state resources to the private sector.

James Westhead, an executive director at Teach

First, a teacher training charity, said he shared the goal of increasing social mobility but suggested that improving state schools would benefit the largest number of children in the long term.

"We have seen through our own work . . . that state maintained schools are also highly effective at raising the aspirations and achievement of disadvantaged pupils through great teaching and leadership," Mr Westhead said.

Pupil payments

£19,000

The cost per child per year to attend St Paul's boys school

£6,000

Amount the government spends per pupil place in the state system

£180m

Total public grant per year to fund school places in the state sector

<£15,000

Parental income per year to qualify for full grant in Liverpool private school trial

£45,000

Maximum parents can earn per year to qualify for grant for their child





Über-grammar: pupils pass Mark Bailey, the high master at St Paul's
Rosie Hallam

