

How private schools ensure a life of privilege for their pupils

From independent schooling it is a short step to a good university and a top job with rich rewards. A new report on social mobility reveals the extent to which privately-educated children go on to dominate the professions.

His father was a policeman who could never have afforded the fees. But for a young David Lyscom, winning a scholarship to a private school was the key that unlocked the door to his future success

On leaving Latymer school in London, he joined the Foreign Office, rose to become an ambassador and put his own children through Marlborough public school - and now champions the system as the new head of the Independent Schools Council (ISC).



"If I hadn't had it, I would not be where I am today," he says. "It opened doors that I don't think would have been opened otherwise."

For the 57% of British parents who told an ISC poll last year they would pay to send their children private if they could afford it, the logic seems clear. Privately educated children are four times more likely than state pupils to get straight As at A-level, and more than three times as likely to go to university. Just under half of the pupils accepted at Oxford and Cambridge universities come from the 7% of the population educated at private school.

From there it is a short step to the heart of the establishment. Nearly three quarters of judges, about a third of FTSE 100 chief executives, half of all senior journalists and more than a third of MPs - were privately schooled.

So what is it that private schools do for their pupils that state schools cannot? Do they merely cream off easy pupils who would prosper anywhere, or is there something special in their ethos - and if so, could the state sector copy it?

It is a debate that not only divides politicians but pits parent against parent. Last week's ruling by the Charity Commission that two of the five private schools it had reviewed did not justify their charitable status triggered a furious debate.

The commission's favoured solution - more bursaries for poor children to attend private school has been criticized: "If we took all the brightest kids from the state sector, you would have an uproar saying we were destroying the social mix in state schools," says Lyscom.

Michael Pryke of the Campaign for State Education argues, meanwhile, that bursaries are mere tokenism and that the damage private schools do to society by stripping middle-class children out of the comprehensive system outweighs any benefits: "The idea that schools like Eton can be considered charitable because they open their doors to a handful of poor children is nonsense."



The barriers reserving plum jobs for the privileged are erected from the cradle and persist into middle age, and the evidence suggests they are growing stronger.

By the time this September's intake of five-year-olds arrives at the school gates, their futures are already being shaped.

A bright baby from a poor background is liable to be overtaken by a less bright baby from a wealthy background by the age of 22 months, boosted by educated parents and a stimulating home environment, according to research first published by the then education secretary Estelle Morris. And that's just the start.

Almost 30% of children on free school meals did not get five good GCSEs last year: two thirds of children from lower socio-economic groups do not make it to A-levels.

Children on free school meals represent just a staggering 0.5% of all pupils gaining three As at A-level, the magic circle eligible for places at top universities.

And it is not for lack of innate ability. The Sutton Trust, a charity that campaigns to improve and create educational opportunities for young people

from many non-privileged backgrounds, estimates that every year 60,000 pupils in the top 20% of their peer group academically do not make it to higher education. Bright pupils who are educated in poor neighbourhoods are more likely to be steered into NVQs, not academic exams, the trust's research suggests.

And whether or not, as the former deputy prime minister, John Prescott, recently put it, "there are still teachers around who don't encourage kids from poorer working-class homes", expectations both at school and at home may still be too low.

The higher education minister, David Lammy, who told the Commons earlier this month that no state school in his Tottenham constituency had ever sent a child to Oxford, argues that teachers lacking experience of top universities themselves may be slower to identify suitable candidates for Oxbridge.

And even for students who beat these odds, further hurdles follow graduation. Unpaid internships are now an accepted route into many careers, favouring those with the family connections to secure them, and the means to survive without a salary, and in a tight job market the soft skills - self-confidence, teamwork, communication -

instilled by private schools are critical.

Such factors, along with an increasing trend for graduate entry in professions such as journalism, which once allowed school-leavers to work their way up, mean **social mobility** in 9 out of 12 professions studied by the review is now actually moving backwards.

On current social trends, the next generation of lawyers will come from families 70% wealthier than average: those born in 1958 had families just 43% richer than average.

And that means it will be not only the poor squeezed out of the top jobs, but also increasingly children from middle-class backgrounds whose families once took their rise for granted.

