

OPINION ARTICLE for the Sunday Times July 2021

There has been an extraordinary amount of comment on this year's A-level results. As the Headteacher of Balcarras—a state comprehensive school—I am proud of the achievements of our students. The vast majority have gained entry onto their first-choice course for next year and this includes seven who are going to study at Oxbridge, several onto highly sought-after degree apprenticeships and over 50% to Russell Group Universities.

However, the celebratory mood of A-level results day was quickly tempered by an uneasiness as I digested some of the media commentary on the widening gap between state and independent schools. The Conservative MP Andrew Bridgen argued that the gap had widened because independent schools had offered a superior provision during the pandemic.

Grade inflation occurred across the system but was most acute in private schools leading many to the same conclusion as Mr Bridgen. However, I am convinced this is too simplistic an analysis.

There is no way to tell whether the higher grades obtained at private schools, or indeed anywhere else, were justified because there was no proper system of national standardisation or moderation. That which did occur resulted in less than one percent of grades being altered. In effect each school was left to its own devices and could award whatever grades it wished.

Mr Bridgen and other commentators seem to believe that the state sector needs to look to independent schools for guidance on how to improve. My own school has a close relationship with the local independents, and we have over the years learned much from one another.

However, I am convinced that the most important lesson that state schools can learn from private ones is that schools work best when they are funded properly.

In the analysis that I have read since results day no one has mentioned that there has been a drastic cut in funding for school based sixth forms over the last decade. I believe that this funding cut is certain to entrench the advantage already held by private schools and do much to damage the cause of social mobility in this country.

In the academic year 2008/9 my school received around £5,000 per sixth former. By 2020/21 this had dropped to just over £4,000. Taking a 2% inflation rate into account this represents a cut of 37%. By comparison the sixth form day fees at a local independent school in Cheltenham rose from £20,823 to £29,280 during the same period. This is an increase of 41%.

At the start of the last decade the school in question was receiving four times our income. By 2020 this had risen to over seven times.

I believe that state schools like mine have done a superb job of managing this cut in income, but I fear there will come a point where we are simply being asked to perform miracles. Across many state schools class sizes have increased, the curriculum has narrowed, students are offered fewer A-levels than before (although not at my school) and enrichment opportunities are under pressure.

With or without the pandemic we were always likely to see a widening of the gap between the two sectors. If you introduce such a drastic funding cut to one sector, whilst the other sees its income continue to rise, you would have to be naive to believe that this wouldn't, sooner or later, affect results.

This does not mean that schools like mine will throw in the towel. Quite the reverse. We will do everything we can to make sure that our young people get the education they deserve. However, we

would benefit hugely from a government that was genuinely committed to the cause of social mobility and was prepared to put its money where its mouth was.

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