

It's a WIN-WIN situation

Scholarships and bursaries are not just the right thing to do. *David Goodhew* highlights the advantages and discusses the best way to ensure success for all



'I cannot put into words my gratitude and no action could repay the debt I owe you for genuinely changing the course of my life and allowing a simple boy, a second-generation immigrant, raised by a single mother from a humble background to enjoy an experience worthy of kings. I will never forget what you have done for my family and I am running out of words to describe how appreciative I am for everything you have done for me.'

[Letter from a bursary recipient at Latymer Upper School]

There are many reasons to consider implementing a bursary programme at your school. First and foremost, it is the right thing to do – no charity should exclude the poor, and many of our schools were originally founded to educate children from poor backgrounds.

Secondly, independent schools are often accused of being 'engines of privilege', yet the OECD's latest report on social mobility shows that 'Where disadvantaged students attend advantaged schools, they score 77 points higher, or the equivalent of 2.5 years of schooling'. Bursaries can be a way to 'flip' the advantages of independent schooling to close the attainment gap, and give pupils from all backgrounds access to academic excellence, high quality sport, music or drama, and the vital 'soft skills' and confidence that are key to success in later life.

Thirdly, partial bursaries (50% awards for example) can help to alleviate the issue of affordability.

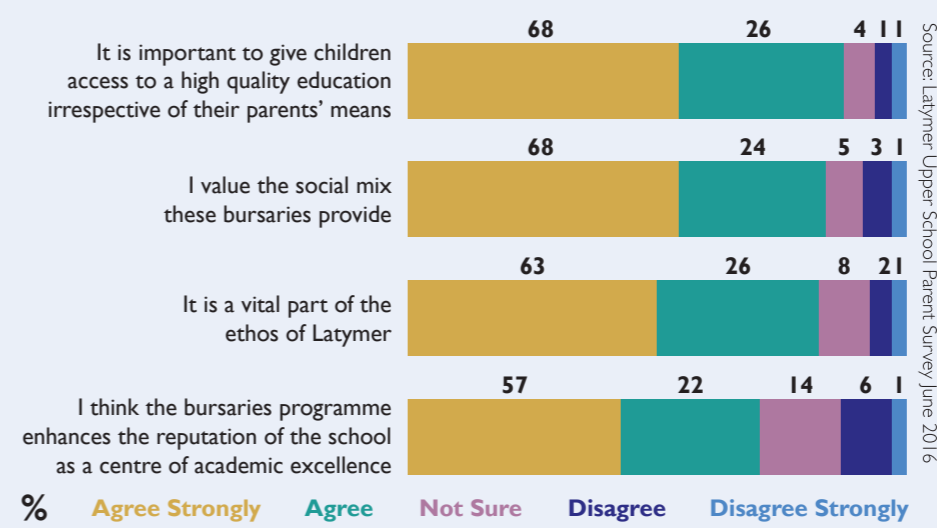
A diverse pupil body pays off

Contrary to popular mythology around 'gold-plated swimming pools topped up by freshly-milked unicorn tears', independent school fee increases have risen higher than inflation over the last decade for the same reason that state school costs have – namely staff costs (in particular National Insurance and pension contributions). This poses a problem in that some very wealthy parents can still easily afford the most expensive fees, and so fee freezes or cuts are effectively giving discounts to families who don't need it.

Means-tested partial awards can allow fees to become affordable again for those middle-income families who risk being 'priced out' of independent schools.

And, a more diverse pupil body can be an important differentiator and recruiter for prospective families, as the slide opposite from a parent survey at Latymer Upper shows.

REASONS FOR THE BURSARIES PROGRAMME



Funding a programme

So, how do you go about building a bursary programme, especially if (like us) you don't have the luxury of a significant founding endowment or a friendly city corporation or livery company? Clearly, funding will need to be secured, typically from one of the following sources: a percentage of fee-income, cumulative donations from groups of parents and alumni; and sponsorship of individual bursaries by individual parents or alumni.

This is mainly the province of a school's development office. From the outset, however, it is important that governors, senior leaders, donors and the admissions team have clarity, and are in agreement, about the criteria being used to select bursary candidates.

Finding suitable candidates

As admissions professionals, the immediate concern is to ensure a pipeline of suitable candidates. This requires initiative, effort and patience, as all the marketing activity in the world can still fail to reach families from non-traditional backgrounds. I know of heads who have spent time at local supermarkets or hired a room at the local football club in order to reach the right families.

Although my own school is oversubscribed by ten to one at 11+, we have been advertising on the back of buses (successfully) to raise awareness of our

bursary programme. This year over 400 of our 1,400 applicants were for bursary places. One excellent way in is via partnership activity with feeder primary schools: Year 5 and 6 teachers can be powerful advocates for the best interests of their pupils, and enjoy the trust and confidence of families. As is so often the case, word of mouth recommendation is invaluable in persuading families to apply.

Helping the process

Once a family has been encouraged to apply, they may need help to navigate an admissions process that is far more complex than the local education authority system. Being prepared to offer advice by phone, or help to complete forms in person, can go a long way to keeping families in the pipeline. Likewise, our families appreciate that we do our own means-testing and home visits, rather than outsourcing the job to an impersonal third party. This helps us to build relationships early on.

Many schools offer past paper practice, or even training sessions, to all applicants to help 'level the playing field' and ensure that bursary candidates can compete fairly with their more privileged (and often tutored) peers. It is important that anyone involved in assessing applications, and especially interviewing, has received training in unconscious bias and that decisions are made with appropriate regard to context.

For example, if we are assessing entrance exam results for a candidate from a primary school in 'special measures' that hasn't had a permanent Maths teacher for four years, this is relevant contextual information!

It is not just the children who will be feeling anxious throughout this process – parents will also need a lot of support and reassurance. They may well be worried about not 'fitting in' or not being able to afford 'extras'. Again, being prepared to offer support via phone or in person goes a long way, as well as thinking through issues in advance. For example, at Latymer we ensure all our bursary families are able to attend school social events free of charge, and there is a fund to support all children with the cost of school trips, uniform and music lessons for example.

If all goes well, and the applicant is offered a place and a bursary, this is not necessarily the end of the process. The family may be holding offers from a grammar school or another independent school, and so you may still need to persuade them that you are the right school for their son or daughter. In practice, however, we find that the conversion rate for bursary offers is very high, and is certainly higher than that for fee-payers in some parts of the country.

The final reward

Working in schools is deeply rewarding, but few things can compare with the opportunity to transform a young person's life-chances. As an admissions professional, helping a bursary candidate gain access to your school can be one of the best parts of a job that is so vital, yet regularly under-appreciated.



David Goodhew, Head of Latymer Upper School, launched the *Inspiring Minds* campaign in 2017 which aims to raise £40m to offer one in four pupils a means-tested bursary by 2024. Last year he was a finalist in the 'social mobility champion' category of the UK Social Mobility Awards.