

Bursaries, in changing forms, have been a cornerstone of British education

By Kate Jillings, Co-Founder of [ToucanTech](#)

Bursaries, in one form or another, have been integral to the British school system since the very first schools, independent of the church, emerged in the fifteenth century to educate boys from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The 1900s witnessed three distinct phases of bursary support. Firstly, [direct grant grammar schools](#) from 1945 to 1976, which at its height was funding more than 3% of British school children. One such child, Guy Jillings (my dad!), fondly remembers that his bus fares were covered as part of his Local Education Authority grant to attend Kingston Grammar School in the 1950s.

Then, from 1981 to 1997, the government run [Assisted Places Scheme](#) supported an estimated 80,000 children to attend fee-paying schools in the UK with free or subsidised places.

Lastly, with the abolishment of assisted places, the emergence in the 1980s of privately funded bursary schemes, established by independent schools typically with charitable status and financed predominantly via donations from parents, alumni and local supporters.

Today there are 2,600 independent schools in the UK, educating 7% of school children. Of these kids, the Independent Schools Council reports that [one third are on reduced fees](#), mostly in the form of means-tested bursaries.

More than [£1bn of private financial aid](#) is available to help towards, or completely waive school fees – an impressive amount when you consider the UK government's total [spending on state secondary education](#) is forecasted to be £32bn in 2020.

Bursaries have courted controversy in recent years. Whether it's a school that offers fee-discounts to families earning sizeable salaries (£120k a year) or a school that's turned down bursary funding restricted to white boys, it's a topic that can stir socioeconomic fervour.

How can schools draw a line between those who can afford to pay for their kids to be privately educated, and those who can't? Should bursaries be awarded on any other criteria than the ability to pay? And, for those politically minded, are bursaries sugar-coating a system of fee-paying schools that's driving inequality across the country?

Winchester College recently rejected a whopping reported [£800k pledge](#) from an alum who wanted the funds to be spent specifically on disadvantaged white boys, something which

the school has said is not compatible with its values, although (understandably) a raft of [state schools](#) have not been so discerning about accepting the cash.

Most people in the private education sector have unwavering enthusiasm for bursaries. And with good reason – there’s no shortage of stirring anecdotes about bursaries transforming lives (a quick Google search ‘bursaries transforming lives’ returns hundreds of school websites including Fettes, Caterham, Charterhouse, Worth and The Leys, to name a few).

Tim Filtness, Deputy Head of Sherborne School, is proud of the difference bursaries can make: ‘We offer a large number of bursaries, including some 100% places. The market has shifted very much from scholarships [merit-based] to bursaries [means-tested] and I think it’s a great thing. Lots of our parents couldn’t send their sons to us if it were not for the funding we offer’.

My alma mater, Lady Eleanor Holles (LEH), founded in 1709, was established for the education of 50 poor girls in London’s parish of St. Giles’ in Cripplegate. Today, located on a large green plot in Hampton, the school supports 8% of their students with £1m-worth of bursaries, a percentage that the Headmistress hopes will grow.

An inaugural [Bursary Ball](#) in December raised more than £60k for LEH’s bursary fund. Previous bursary recipients have played a big part in the campaign to raise new funds. Georgia Galton Ayling, who was at LEH from 2007-13 before winning a place at Oxford University and then becoming a teacher, is featured on the LEH website and made a passionate speech at the Bursary Ball:

‘I wanted to use my privilege to try to combat the huge inequality that exists in our education system. I feel incredibly strongly that a pupil’s academic success should not rely on their socioeconomic background.’

She added: ‘I can only thank LEH from the bottom of my heart for the education they provided me with. I also want to thank everyone who supports the bursary fund because you really are changing the lives of children in a way that they will never forget. Thank you on behalf of all of them.’

It’s hard to find any bursary recipient who doesn’t feel similar gratitude. A childhood friend sent me this message about her experience: ‘I received a bursary from Westminster [school] to study there for my A levels. They covered 50% of the fees to make it the same cost that my parents had been paying at my previous school, which had already been a struggle for them.

Without the bursary I wouldn’t have been able to attend Westminster. It was means tested (my parents were interviewed and had to give financial details) and also based on my entrance results.



Since 2001, I gift to Westminster School every year and ask that the money is solely used for the purpose of bursaries. I believe they have a large and active scheme and I wholeheartedly agree in the principle of making private education more accessible.'

This virtuous circle, of beneficiaries giving back to their old schools, helps to secure the future of bursaries and continue to widen access to private education - a trajectory that's set to continue as more UK schools step up their fundraising efforts in 2020.

Kate Jillings is the co-founder of [ToucanTech](#), a community software for schools to manage their fundraising, bursary, alumni, marketing and careers activities. Combining a CRM, website-builder, email newsletters, online payments, reporting, events, mentoring, forms and more, it's an affordable, beautiful and secure system used by 150 schools.