

How to break the public school grip on the City



Lorraine Langham

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*COVID-19 is a wake-up call that must be heeded on ensuring every child gets a fair chance to succeed, writes **Lorraine Langham***

The Covid 19 pandemic has impacted upon everyone but one of the most depressing realities has been the discriminatory nature of the virus, on health and in education.

For the 7% of pupils who attend independent schools, repeated lockdowns have had a relatively modest impact on their education. Their schools have ample resource to move to online education and their families typically have greater digital and online capacity, or physical space within the home. For the 93% of pupils in state education, the experience has been far less consistent. Poorer families struggle to access the technology, pay data charges, and provide the space needed to support learning at home.

[National Foundation for Educational Research data shows](#) that the education of disadvantaged and BAME children went backwards compared with better-off peers during the first lockdown. Sadly, the scales are already heavily stacked in favour of those from privileged backgrounds within the City. Nine out of 10 senior roles in financial services are held by those from high socio-economic backgrounds, according to research by the Bridge Group, and people from less privileged backgrounds take 25% longer to progress, despite no evidence of poorer performance. Half of persistently disadvantaged young people do not even know anyone in a job they want to do. The pandemic has left too many young people feeling they won't ever succeed.

The moral argument for change is strong – and so is the business case. But what can be done?

A young person's start in life should not limit their future. The alumni opportunities offered by independent schools, often called 'the old boys' network', make a huge difference to their students. We need to help state schools to establish the same thriving alumni networks, giving all pupils the information, tools and connections that can help them succeed.

Relatable role models are crucial to motivating and inspiring young people - you can't be what you can't see. In her book, "Mirror Thinking: How Role Models Make Us Human", the psychologist Fiona Murden discusses how the mirror neuron in the human brain shapes our lives. It defines us through the role models we observe and interact with. She found this was particularly true of adolescents. There is also a strong link between social and emotional development and ability to learn. Put another way, the 'Covid generation' needs role models to give them hope and self-belief, support them to engage in education, and a network to help them seize a brighter future.

We can take heart that part of the solution is here. Alumni networks are a rich resource. They are inexpensive, sustainable, effective and under-used

providing relatable role models for young people. My organisation, Future First, provides a scalable model for closing the gap and releasing the grip of public schools on the City – working with 400 schools and over 70,000 pupils. Alumni networks work – that’s why all young people should be given the chance to connect with them.

Supporting alumni networks is good for business too. The act of volunteering to be a role model improves well being, leading to better self-health ratings. So organisations get a more motivated workforce, with improved leadership skills and a greater understanding of how to motivate and engage others.

For every student to benefit from the positive influence of alumni, role models and interactions with leading employers, proactive policy action by government is needed. This month, the Welsh Government published a [toolkit](#) for all state schools in Wales. It is the first example of a UK government putting alumni at the heart of education.

City institutions can act today by helping to build alumni networks in state schools and provide opportunities for pupils to experience a wider world of work through insight days, work experience and personal connections. Imagine the transformative impact if every City business sponsored an alumni network in 10 state schools? Small investment, big impact, and sustainable long-term.

The Covid crisis has created the opportunity to push ‘reset’ on our lives and on the economy. The CBI’s Director General, Tony Danker, says we need our response to be “more like 1945 than 2008”. To genuinely share prosperity and opportunity we must break the stranglehold of the privileged. It’s not enough to simply advertise roles wider – people need to see themselves in them and have a pathway to get there. Policy makers need to incentivise these connections and make alumni networks a fact of life for all state schools.

If we don’t make change happen, it won’t.

Lorraine Langham is Chief Executive of education charity [Future First](#)