



**Wales Institute of Social & Economic
Research, Data & Methods**

**| Lasting Benefits: The Long-term Legacy of the Assisted Places
Scheme for Assisted Place Holders |**

A summary of the findings of a survey undertaken by WISERD for the Sutton Trust

Sally Power, Stuart Sims and Geoff Whitty
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The Assisted Places Scheme was introduced in 1980 by the Conservative Government to provide a 'ladder of opportunity' for academically able students from poor homes. Over the next 17 years, more than 75,000 pupils received means-tested assistance from public funds to attend the most selective and prestigious private schools in England and Wales. The Scheme proved highly controversial and was eventually abolished when New Labour came to power in 1997. However, the issue of how best to cater for the academically able child has never really been resolved and there have been recent calls for initiatives similar to the Assisted Places Scheme to be reintroduced. This report seeks to contribute to the debate through examining the long term legacy of the Scheme through tracing the progress of some of its beneficiaries.

Earlier research that compared the progress of students from state school and Assisted Place backgrounds showed that Assisted Place holders did better than state educated respondents at GCSE and A-level. It also showed that they gained places at Oxbridge with lower A level results than their state-schooled counterparts. They also earned significantly more than their state-educated colleagues. The research also highlighted the additional costs of participating in informal activities associated with being in independent schools.

This research draws on a survey of 77 former Assisted Place holders, drawn from the earlier sample, who are now in their early forties. The survey was designed to answer four broad questions:

1. How have Assisted Place holders progressed in terms of occupational status, security and satisfaction?
2. What role do they perceive their secondary education played in shaping their future?
3. To what extent has it influenced social allegiances and attitudes?
4. What is the legacy of their Assisted Place for the education of their children?

1. Occupational status, security and satisfaction

Assisted Place holders continue to benefit from their secondary school education. Even those who did not go to university are now in middle class occupations with a good income. This suggests that they may have benefitted from a private school premium over and above that associated with educational attainment. They have also demonstrated significant resilience in the face of the current economic climate.

It is of course impossible to ascertain with any certainty how our respondents might have fared had they not received an Assisted Place. Earlier statistical analysis indicates that, on the whole, Assisted Place holders who completed their schooling in independent schools up to age 18 gained higher

levels of qualifications and went to more prestigious universities than might have been expected if they had attended state-maintained comprehensive schools.

This survey suggests that Assisted Place holders continue to reap the benefits of their secondary education. The overwhelming majority have continued their upward trajectory in professional and managerial occupations with high levels of earnings. Even our non- graduates are in solidly middle class occupations with a good income. This suggests that they have benefited from a private school premium over and above that associated with educational attainment. Despite a sometimes variable academic record, our respondents considered themselves 'successful'.

Our respondents reported not only satisfaction but also a fairly strong sense of job security - indicating apparently significant resilience in the face of the current economic climate. Such is their confidence in their future financial security that a significant proportion were anticipating that they would be in a position to take early retirement.

2. Accounting for success

The Assisted Place holders attributed their success to ability and hard work. It is possible that the Scheme lessened any of the potentially damaging effects on attainment commonly associated with socio-economic disadvantage. In addition, our respondents report that their secondary schools were significant in the development of a range of personal attributes, such as self-discipline and self-reliance. These schools also contributed to enduring social networks.

While education featured as a very important factor in their success, most respondents accounted for their success in terms of individual attributes of ability and hard work. Social background was considered relatively unimportant. While this strong emphasis on the meritocratic basis for their achievements may go against much social scientific evidence, it may indicate that for these individuals the Assisted Places Scheme enabled them to override any disadvantages associated with social background.

In relation to education, there was general consensus that secondary schools were the most important institutions in shaping subsequent careers. Clearly secondary schools play an important role in helping students obtain the necessary qualifications to enter those universities that are going to enable them to pursue well-paid prestigious careers. But they also aim to develop a range of 'soft skills' that are increasingly important in recruitment processes. Our respondents report that their secondary schools were significant in the development of a range of personal attributes, such as self-discipline and self-reliance. These schools also appear to have contributed to the development of enduring social networks.

3. Allegiances and attitudes

In spite of their upward social mobility, our respondents have maintained strong ties with their families. However, their social circles are cosmopolitan and similarly highly educated. They also are more likely to have settled down with partners who are well-qualified. A high proportion have partners who were also privately educated. The majority of respondents believed that standards in state-maintained schools were lower than in private schools.

Of course education is not only about 'skills' - hard or soft. Schools are important in shaping particular kinds of allegiances and attitudes. It is often argued that one of the benefits (but also one of the risks) of initiatives such as the Assisted Places Scheme is that they dislocate children from

their communities. Our data do not indicate a high incidence of dislocation and family ties appear to remain strong. However, our respondents report that they move in cosmopolitan and well-qualified circles. They also are more likely to have settled down with partners who are well-qualified – with a relatively high proportion having been privately educated.

In general, there is some evidence of a ‘private sector affinity’. The majority of respondents believed that standards in state-maintained schools were lower than in private schools. However, their support for private education does not straightforwardly reflect any particular political preferences.

4. Planning their children’s education

Their own experience of private education has strongly influenced the decisions that they have made about their children’s education. Around half our respondents with children have chosen private schools for their children (the national average is 7 per cent). Our respondents are overwhelmingly in favour of the reintroduction of the Assisted Places Scheme.

Three quarters of our respondents now have children. Of those with school-aged children, just under one half have chosen private schools for their children – a proportion significantly higher than the seven per cent who do so within the UK as a whole. The proportion at secondary schools was slightly higher than the proportion at primary schools.

The quality of the local state school was the most important factor in parents’ decisions about where to send their children. This was the case for those who went private (for whom it was a push factor) and those who chose state-maintained schools (for whom it was a pull factor). The reputation and academic profile of the school were also important considerations. The only factor where there was a significant divergence between our private- and state-school choosers was in relation to the extent to which they based their decision on their own experience of school. This was a more important factor for those choosing a private school.

Finally, our respondents are overwhelmingly in favour of the reintroduction of the Assisted Places Scheme.

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All copy of the full findings can be obtained by contacting Prof Sally Power (powers3@cf.ac.uk) or downloading from the Sutton Trust website by clicking on the following link:

<http://www.suttontrust.com/public/documents/assistedplacesreport0310.pdf>