

# Head teacher blasts rich and poor divide blame as 'nonsense'

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The head teacher of a leading independent school in Birmingham has hit back at criticisms by Government that appears to lay the blame for the gap between rich and poor on private education.

Sarah Evans, principal of King Edward VI High Schools for Girls in Edgbaston, criticised the plans, outlined by Lord Mandelson, to overhaul university entry that could see applicants from poor families awarded a two-grade "head start" over better-off candidates.

This could result in many middle-class candidates at high-performing inde-

pendent and grammar schools being omitted from popular courses at leading universities in favour of candidates from disadvantaged families.

A report last month from former health secretary Alan Milburn called for measures to help more students from deprived families go to university following concerns of a middle-class grip on professional careers such as law and medicine.

It suggested the possibility of middle class students paying higher tuition fees to pay for free university education for those from poorer backgrounds.

Ms Evans said the independent education sector was seemingly coming under fire.

She said: "These attacks have included reports implying that independent education is somehow responsible for the gap between rich and poor in our country. This is nonsense.

"Seven per cent of children in this country go through independent schools with tens of thousands of those already being on means-tested bursaries, coming from families with a low income."

Miss Evans continued: "There appears surprise and cries of injustice that children of parents who are holding down professional jobs should themselves achieve the A-level grades to go to good universities. If the reverse were true, it would be just as much a concern as the belief that we live in a country where

many children are not getting good A-levels despite a formal education because both parents are in lower status jobs.

"If it is true that, say, three quarters of 18-year-olds could succeed at university level then the problem is always one of supply, and unless university places are expanded whatever system is used will be deemed to be unfair, as some applicants will be rejected.

"Current thinking is to broaden the university offer, including very different types of courses to cater for students with a different academic profile. There is no evidence to show that this will lead to more students earning higher salaries and enjoy the accompanying benefits."



**Sarah Evans of King Edward VI High Schools for Girls in Edgbaston**