

## NEWS

# Knowle's only private school hits back at MP's criticism

**We're not exclusive, says head, but MP stands firm in her view**

THE HEAD teacher and parents at South Bristol's only fee-paying school have hit back at comments by an MP that private education damages prospects for state pupils.

Karin Smyth, Labour MP for Bristol South, was reported in January's Voice as saying that private schools "erect barriers that kids in South Bristol struggle to overcome".

The constituency has the second-lowest proportion of students going to university. Ms Smyth called this statistic "shameful", and said the large number of private schools in Bristol was partly to blame.

Her views have not gone down well at Cleve House, the £2,000-a-term school for pupils from 2-11 in Wells Road, Knowle.

"We have been here for 82 years and we fulfil a very important role," said Craig Wardle, head teacher and owner of Cleve House.

Small schools like Cleve House are not exclusive, and parents often make big sacrifices to send children there, taking a second mortgage, an extra job, or seeking help from grandparents. "They feel the sacrifice is worth it," said Mr Wardle.

He feels schools like Cleve House take pressure off the state

sector, where teachers and budgets are under strain and classes have up to 33 pupils. "Some of our children have had a negative experience in the state sector, and they come to us, where class sizes are about 12 pupils, hoping that we can repair some of the damage. Small schools with caring family environments like ours are where children like that are able to feel at ease."

"It would be nice to have some acknowledgement of what the smaller independent schools do, such as lending out staff and facilities. It's all well and good laying the blame at the independents' door" – instead state schools should be made more appealing, he said.

Mr Wardle does not believe achievement is down to socio-economic background, or whether a school is fee-paying. Children who are educated to be resilient, and taught that it's not bad to have a go and give it your best, surely have a better chance of success in life, he said.

The school says it is a long way from the image of affluent families who employ a nanny to drop their children at school.

"Where we sit in South Bristol, it's a world apart," said one Cleve House parent.

Ms Smyth told the Voice: "My focus is ensuring that every child in Bristol South has the opportunity of a quality education. Spending several thousand pounds a term on private schools

is not an option for most working families in Bristol South. We need to ensure that state schools are funded properly so that every child fulfils their potential."