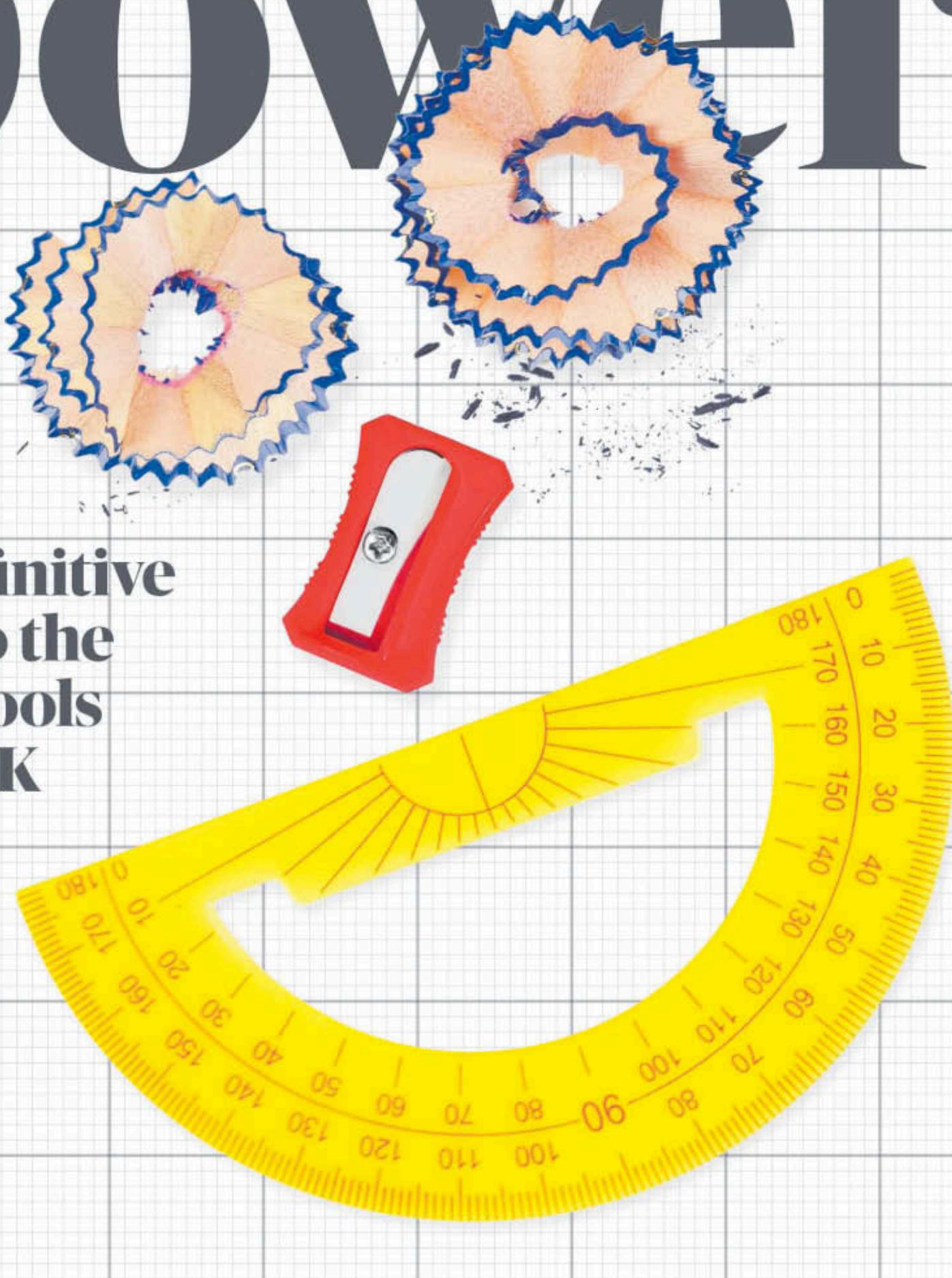




THE SUNDAY TIMES

Parent power

The definitive
guide to the
top schools
in the UK



Parent Power

Your guide to the best schools in the country

It is one of the most important decisions you can make as a parent: which primary or secondary school to send your child to.

Parent Power is here to help with The Sunday Times' definitive guide to the UK's top 2,000 schools. Go online and you will be able to compare private and state results in the same table, and find out data on each school from attendance rates, percentage of children with SEND needs, or the day fees, as well as the latest inspection reports.

The schools featured have teachers brimming with passion, ideas and dedication. Their purpose? Preparing pupils to be curious, problem-solving and risk-taking, ready for anything that comes their way in the future. For high achievement should not come at the expense of happiness.

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The five-year-old who knows everything about the Kuiper belt

What should you do if you think your child might be a genius? Caroline Scott speaks to the parents and experts nurturing their potential

When Kalil Warren was eight months old, he would pick up his mother Kura's phone and FaceTime his granny Jane, a former primary school teacher.

"He had worked out the code to unlock the screen and he could find her and my sister in my contacts," Kura, 37, the director of a technology company, says. Kalil sat unaided at 16 weeks and spoke at seven months. "I was the first of my friends to have a baby so I had no one to compare him to," she says. "I thought it was normal."

During lockdown Kura and her husband, Mark, an architect and town centre manager, realised the vast difference between Kalil and his peers.

"I had a credit card bill with a list of charges we didn't recognise," Kura says. "Kalil had found the Prime app on the TV and rented wildlife and science documentaries." Kalil was not yet two. "He said, 'Mummy, do you know what's between Mars and Jupiter? It's Ceres, it's a dwarf planet that lives in the main asteroid belt.'"

Parenting Kalil has been a joy and a challenge. "Before he went to nursery, I explained to his teacher that Kalil was very able and could already read and write," Kura says. "At three, he was reading my

Mensa has 1,400 UK child members with IQs over 130

REUTERS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

poetry books. So she said, 'Kalil, could you spell cat for me?' And he went, 'Poo poo.' Then she looked at me and asked, 'And how's your mental health?'

Kura and Mark still laugh when thinking about this exchange. While being academically several years ahead, being one of the youngest in his reception class at school meant that Kalil was emotionally less mature and his fine motor skills weren't advanced. "He could read fluently and do year 6 maths, but he couldn't run fast, writing was hard for him and he struggled to do the clasp on his trousers. I had no idea how to support him," Kura says.

In his previous school Kalil would be sent to year 1 to study phonics and maths, which he also found pointless. When some of the boys in his class started calling him "smartypants", he refused to do any extra work or show anyone what he could do.

"He doesn't want to stand out," Kura says.

At six, Kalil's IQ was assessed at 132 (the average IQ is 100). Kura and Mark considered private school but decided against it on financial grounds. "I wanted him to be exposed to normal kids and normal life," Kura says. Now seven, he attends Park Academy in Merton, southwest London, where he is given year 6 spellings to do.

Mensa, the international organisation for people who score in the top 2 per cent of the population on a standardised intelligence test, has 1,400 UK child members aged 3-18 with IQs over 130, and it is thought that about 160,000 of the 8.2 million children in the education system have exceptional learning potential. (The Mensa supervised IQ test is suitable only for children over the age of ten and a half; younger members are assessed by an independent educational psychologist.) An IQ score of about 160

and above means that someone is profoundly gifted. This is about 0.003 per cent of the population (1 in 30,000), equivalent to a few hundred children across the UK. But although the school curriculum, designed for children of average IQ, isn't challenging enough and makes it hard for these pupils to excel, giftedness is not classed as a special educational need and there is no government provision or support since the Young, Gifted and Talented Programme was abandoned by the government in 2010.

Lyn Kendall is a psychologist and educator and was British Mensa's gifted child consultant, a voluntary role she held for 30 years until she stepped down in 2024. "People think it must be great having an exceptional child," she says. "But many, girls in particular, hide themselves. They learn to 'function' because teachers can get snitty if they're always answering. They start to see what the rest of the class are doing and then work at that level." Some even deliberately aim for second or third place."

Crucially, there is no UK-wide IQ screening and no consensus on what a child genius looks like. The Department for Education's description of giftedness – a straight-A pupil, an all-rounder, as good at art and



Bright young things: Maxwell Peake, aged five, has an IQ of 139. Left: Kura Warren and her son, Kalil, aged seven with an IQ of 132

sport as maths and English – does not chime with any of the families we spoke to.

"High cognitive ability can come with intense emotions, uneven development – where some abilities appear significantly above average, and others at or below average – executive dysfunction and struggles in classrooms that aren't set up for the way our children think and process information," says Natalie Jensen, a specialist in gifted education at Potential Plus UK, an independent charity offering support for children with high learning potential.

"Gifted children are usually the ones continually asking questions, wanting to know what, why, when," Kendall says. "But poorer social skills, emotional and behavioural problems, academic inconsistencies, sensory sensitivities and rebelliousness are sadly all common."

Olivia Smith, the chief executive of Potential Plus UK, says families tend to arrive at the organisation in crisis. "We support families with children as young as two, but most are primary age," she says. "They've got a depressed six-year-old or they have been told there's something wrong. Undoubtedly there are children that this all over the UK who are super bright and their parents will have no idea. It's hard to reach those people."

How do you tell the difference between a diligent child who listens well and works hard from one who is academically gifted? "It's not easy to define," Smith says, "but an academically gifted learner often makes unusual connections, asks deep – often 'weird' – questions, and picks up new concepts with little explanation. Their progress can jump around depending on the depth of their interests."

Sarah (not her real name) knew that her daughter Beatrice, 13, was exceptional from 15 months old. "We were excited that she knew her colours. Then we realised she was reading the words on the fridge magnets," she says.

Perhaps they shouldn't have been surprised. Although neither parent went to university, Beatrice's father, Richard, who works in IT, and Sarah are former Mensa members. Beatrice, who was assessed privately when she was three, has an IQ of 180. Their scores put all three of them in the category of genius.

"Yet we are the silliest people you could hope to meet," Sarah says with a laugh. But life has not always been easy for Beatrice, who is intellectually six or seven years ahead of her peers at her private school, but emotionally some way behind.

"We're advocating for her to get the resources she needs to allow her to go as fast as she wants to go," Sarah says. "They suggested chess: she did that when she was four. The work she is capable of doing is not being provided."

Beatrice wants to be a scientist, possibly a physicist. She grasps concepts so quickly that in class she's "bored to tears". She finds it hard to blend in with her peers and Sarah has become more protective as she has got older.

"Trust me," Sarah says. "You don't want to be the mum of a five-year-old who has the reading age of a 12-year-old. People say, 'Don't you think you should just let her be a child?'"

By the time these children arrive at secondary school, experiences can vary. Parents often have more choices available and, after years of challenges, some more idea of what their child needs. For many this means independent or specialist schools, which provide solutions to greater or lesser degrees. But even when social and emotional needs are met, and academic excellence and potential is recognised, the age-not-stage examination system can create issues.

During her time at Mensa, Kendall established support programmes for parents of highly able children to talk about their kids, ask questions and support one another. Gifted children can affect relationships too, she says: "When you have a child who is an attention monster, parents don't get a chance to talk or be alone together."

Smith thinks that as a society we're not as good at celebrating high learning potential as, say, sporting ability. "We don't like people who've been born with an advantage," she says. "It's why we no longer use the word 'gifted' – it sends the wrong message to our children. Yes they have exceptional ability but they've still got to work hard to reach their potential."

Potential Plus UK supported 2,000 children in the UK last year and carried out 100 assessments. About 40 per cent of these indicated a co-occurring recognised additional learning need, suggesting that these children might fall within the dual or multiple exceptionality (DME) category.

"We are seeing more children who have extraordinary academic ability alongside ASD or ADHD," she says. "Profiles are increasingly complex."

By the time Maxwell Peake was 17 months old, he had completed Phase 2 phonics (which children usually learn during reception class, aged four or five). On the one hand, Maxwell, now five, is a normal boy. "He'll kick off if someone takes a toy off him," says his mother, Emma, 37. "But the next minute he'll be explaining which of the dwarf planets live in the Kuiper belt."

And yet life for Maxwell, who has a three-year-old sister, Savannah, who is also bright, has not been easy. Emma and her husband, Ryan, who both work in hospitality, struggled to keep him entertained at home. "I'd read with him a lot," Emma says. And she doesn't mean Thomas the Tank Engine. They were reading Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. "Then he would worry and worry about what would happen if the Earth fell into a black hole because he wasn't emotionally mature enough to cope with the information." While Maxwell can easily do year 6 maths, when it comes to tying his shoelaces or riding a bike, he's just like anyone else.

At the age of four, Maxwell's IQ was assessed at 139, in the top 1 per cent of the population. Emma thinks it is potentially higher because "at four, he had the attention span of a pre-schooler".

A couple of weeks into year 1, his parents moved him from their local primary in Preston, Lancashire, to an independent school with smaller classes where he is educated according to his abilities rather than his age.

Carolina Ghiuzan's nine-year-old daughter Edith has an IQ of 142, meaning she's also in the top 1 per cent of the population. "We don't make a big fuss over her abilities because we don't want her to be influenced by the idea that she's a gifted child," says Ghiuzan, 39, a psychology teacher who lives in Canterbury, Kent. "We just try to offer her as many opportunities as possible. She's one of the youngest in the class but always finishes her work first, so teachers have to be prepared to give her extra."

Happily, Edith does not struggle with friendships, she says: "I think she's socially gifted as well."

potentialplusuk.org
Additional reporting by Mashaal Hussain

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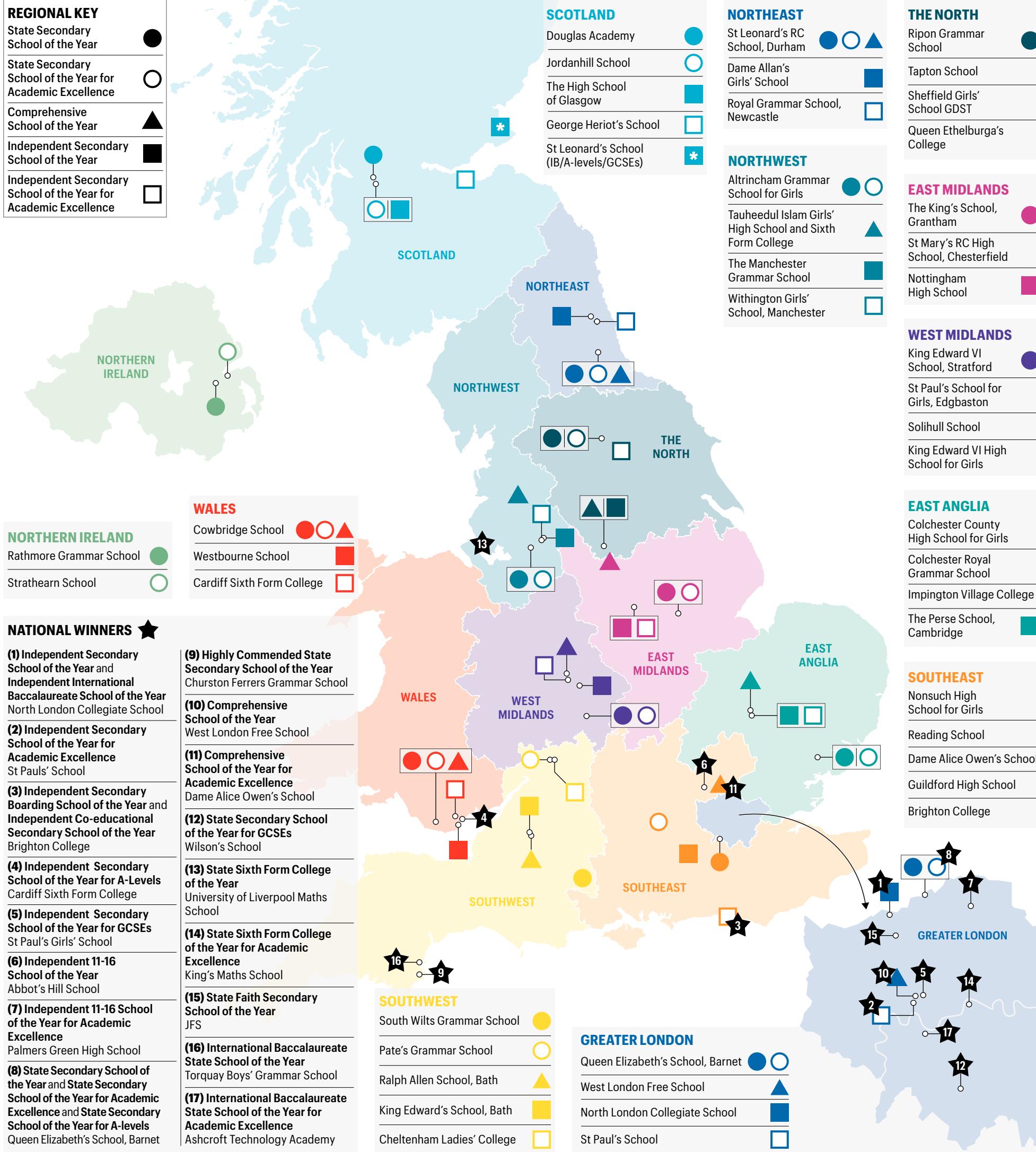
Independent School of the Year
For Academic Excellence (92.5% A*/A at A Level)

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SCHOOLS GUIDE 2026
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL OF THE YEAR FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Parent Power

The class of 2026: top secondary schools

secondary schools



TOP 100 SECONDARY SCHOOLS

S = Selective, PS = Partially Selective, C = Comprehensive

2026 rank	Location	Admissions	A-Level A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)	GCSE A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)	Location	Admissions	A-Level A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)	GCSE A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)
31	Strathearn School	Belfast	S 83.0 97.4	S 75.4 76.3	66	Newport Girls' High School	Newport	S 75.4 76.3
32	Sir Thomas Rich's School	Gloucester	S 83.1 77.9	S 73.6 79.6	67	Stroud High School	Stroud	S 73.6 79.6
33	Altringham Grammar School for Boys	Altringham	S 82.2 79.2	S 80.4 65.3	68	Bishop Wordsworth's School	Salisbury	S 80.4 65.3
34	Newstead Wood School	Orpington	S 77.3 87.9	S 75.7 73.0	69	Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School	Belfast	S 79.4 66.3
35	Rathmore Grammar School	Belfast	S 86.3 69.3	S 75.7 73.0	70	Herschel Grammar School	Slough	S 86.3 69.3
36	St Dominic's Grammar School	Belfast	S 85.3 71.3	S 81.7 59.6	71	Ripon Grammar School	Ripon	S 81.7 59.6
37	Woodford County High School	Woodford Green	S 78.0 85.0	S 78.3 66.3	72	Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School and Sixth Form College	Blackburn	C 78.3 66.3
38	Sale Grammar School	Sale	S 83.3 87.0	S 85.3 52.0	73	The Rochester Grammar School	Rochester	S 85.3 52.0
39	Dr Challoner's Grammar School	Amersham	S 87.5 64.8	S 76.0 70.0	74	Aylesbury High School	Aylesbury	S 76.0 70.0
40	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys	Birmingham	S 84.5 70.6	S 81.8 57.4	75	Ballymena Academy	Ballymena	S 81.8 57.4
41	Bishop Vesey's Grammar School	Sutton Coldfield	S 80.6 77.5	S 74.6 70.2	76	Southend High School for Girls	Southend-on-Sea	S 74.6 70.2
42	Chesham Grammar School	Chesham	S 85.7 66.9	S 79.0 61.1	77	Rainey Endowed School	Magherafelt	S 79.0 61.1
43	The Blue Coat School, Liverpool	Liverpool	S 78.2 81.6	S 78.0 59.8	78	Churton Ferrers Grammar School	Brixham	S 78.0 59.8
44	West London Free School	London	PS 87.4 63.1	S 76.9 56.4	79	Carrickfergus Grammar School	Carrickfergus	S 80.9 56.4
45	South Wilts Grammar School	Salisbury	S 79.9 78.0	S 78.0 59.8	80	Invicta Grammar School	Maidstone	S 78.0 59.8
46	Friends' School, Lisburn	Lisburn	S 79.1 78.2	S 78.2 59.8	81	St Andrew's RC School, Leatherhead	Leatherhead	C 82.4 52.5
47	King Edward VI School, Stratford	Stratford-upon-Avon	S 86.0 90.7	S 85.5 65.4	82	Tunbridge Wells Girls' Grammar School	Tunbridge Wells	S 75.1 66.6
48	Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock	Cheam	S 89.2 82.8	S 72.6 71.5	83	Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School	Sidcup	S 72.6 71.5
49	Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls	Sutton Coldfield	S 76.5 82.8	S 83.0 50.0	84	Camden School for Girls	London	PS 83.0 50.0
50	Bexley Grammar School	Welling	S 84.1 67.3	S 72.9 69.7	85	Townley Grammar School	Bexleyheath	S 72.9 69.7
51	St Ambrose College	Altringham	S 80.3 74.6	S 76.0 62.0	86	Urmston Grammar	Manchester	S 76.0 62.0
52	Upton Court Grammar School	Slough	S 76.2 65.4	S 72.7 68.2	87	Ilford County High School	Ilford	S 72.7 68.2
53	Lumen Christi College	Derry	S 79.9 74.4	S 70.4 72.8	88	Rugby High School	Rugby	S 70.4 72.8
54	King Edward VI Five Ways School	Birmingham	S 80.0 74.0	S 64.6 83.5	89	Heckmondwike Grammar School	Heckmondwike	S 70.2 72.0
55	Royal Latin School	Buckingham	S 83.2 67.9	S 70.2 72.0	90	St Bernard's RC Grammar School	Slough	S 68.5 75.5
56	Beaconsfield High School	Beaconsfield	S 80.9 71.2	S 68.5 75.5	91	Dartford Grammar School for Girls	Dartford	S 68.5 75.5
57	Westcliff High School for Boys	Westcliff-on-Sea	S 77.9 74.9	S 75.1 62.1	91a	John Hampden Grammar School	High Wycombe	S 75.1 62.1
58	Sir William Borlase's Grammar School	Marlow	S 82.0 66.0	S 72.7 65.9	93	King Edward VI Handsworth School for Girls	Birmingham	S 72.7 65.9
59	JFS	Harrow	C 87.5 54.0	S 80.2 50.7	94	Down High School	Downpatrick	S 80.2 50.7
60	Loretto Grammar School	Altringham	S 78.8 72.9	S 74.2 65.8	95	Sir Henry Floyd Grammar School	Aylesbury	S 74.2 65.8
61	Southend High School for Boys	Southend-on-Sea	S 79.8 68.9	S 78.0 54.0	96	The Charter School North Dulwich	London	C 78.0 54.0
62	Sullivan Upper School	Holwood	S 80.9 66.7	S 77.1 55.5	97	The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School	London	C 77.1 55.5
63	Wolverhampton Girls' High School	Wolverhampton	S 78.1 72.3	S 72.2 65.2	98	Lancaster Royal Grammar School	Lancaster	S 72.2 65.2
64	Banbridge Academy	Banbridge	S 78.0 72.2	S 78.0 53.0	99	Waldegrave School, Twickenham	London	C 78.0 53.0
65	St Louis Grammar School	Ballymena	S 85.9 55.8	S 74.8 59.1	100	Haberdashers' Adams	Newport	S 74.8 59.1

Methodology

schools in England, 65 private and state 11-16 schools, and 50 sixth form colleges. It also ranks the highest-performing 300 independent schools in the UK and 17 under Scotland's Highers and Standards system, and 61 IB schools. Schools are ranked by

performance at A-level and GCSE in summer 2025.

The number of A*, A and B grades gained are expressed as a percentage of the total number of A-level entries overall. This is double-weighted. The number of 9, 8, 7 gained at GCSE is expressed as a total of the

number of GCSE entries overall. We include IGCSEs sat in private schools. This is single-weighted. School rankings are based on their combined performance.

If a school does not appear in the league table, it is most likely because it did not respond to our requests for



Students at St Paul's School For Girls, Edgbaston

its results or the results could not be found in the public domain.

Awards are made using the ranking and editorial discretion.

TOP 100 INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

2026 rank	Location	Admissions	A-Level A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)	GCSE A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)	Location	Admissions	A-Level A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)	GCSE A*-B% (A*-A/A/B/GCSE)
31	Concord College	Shrewsbury	95.3 86.2	S 86.6 86.5	66	Radley College	Abingdon	S 86.6 86.5
32	Trinity School, Croydon	London	95.0 86.1	S 85.7 86.1	67	The Leys School	Cambridge	S 85.7 86.1
33	James Allen's Girls' School	London	92.7 90.7	S 86.1 85.0	68	Sir William Perkins' School	Chertsey	S 86.1 85.0
34	Notting Hill and Ealing High School GDST	London	91.4 93.1	S 87.9 80.2	69	Sheffield Girls' GDST	Sheffield	S 87.9 80.2
35	Withington Girls' School	Manchester	91.3 92.9	S 89.5 76.7	70	King Edward's School, Bath	Bath	S 89.5 76.7
36	Wimbledon High School GDST	London	94.6 85.9	S 88.3 83.4	71	St Dunstan's College	London	S 88.3 83.4
37	Brockfords' School	Woodford Green	93.2 88.3	S 87.0 84.3	72	Ibsstock Place School	London	S 87.0 84.3
38	Caterham School	Caterham	91.4 91.5	S 90.7 73.6	73	Chercher's College	Petersfield	S 90.7 73.6
39	The Manchester Grammar School	Manchester	93.0 88.2	S 88.0 79.0	73a	Hurstpierpoint College	Burgess Hill	S 88.0 79.0
40	Cardiff Sixth Form College	Cardiff	99.6 74.8	S 87.3 80.2	75	St John's College, Cardiff	Cardiff	S 87.3 80.2
41	King Edward's School, Birmingham	Birmingham	94.8 83.8	S 85.8 82.4	76	Benenden School	Cranbrook	S 85.8 82.4
42	Emanuel School	London	91.3 90.9	S 84.4 77.1	77	Haileybury	Hertford	S 84.4 77.1
43	Etham College	London	91.9 88.5	S 83.5 76.6	77a	Harrodian	London	S 83.5 76.6
44	Oxford High School GDST	Oxford	89.3 93.6	S 84.8 83.6	78	The King's School, Chester	Chester	S 84.8 83.6
45	Channing School	London	95.1 87.1	S 86.2 80.8	80	Queen's College London	London	S 86.2 80.8
46	Dulwich College	London	89.1 93.5	S 87.0 79.0	81	François Holland, Regent's Park	London	S 87.0 7

Parent Power

Louise Eccles, Education and Early Years Editor

For many parents, getting their child through the 11-plus test is seen as a necessary evil to secure a coveted place at a selective grammar or private school.

Yet tutoring for verbal (VR) and non-verbal reasoning (NVR) tests turns children into "exam bots" and even hampers their intelligence, education experts have warned.

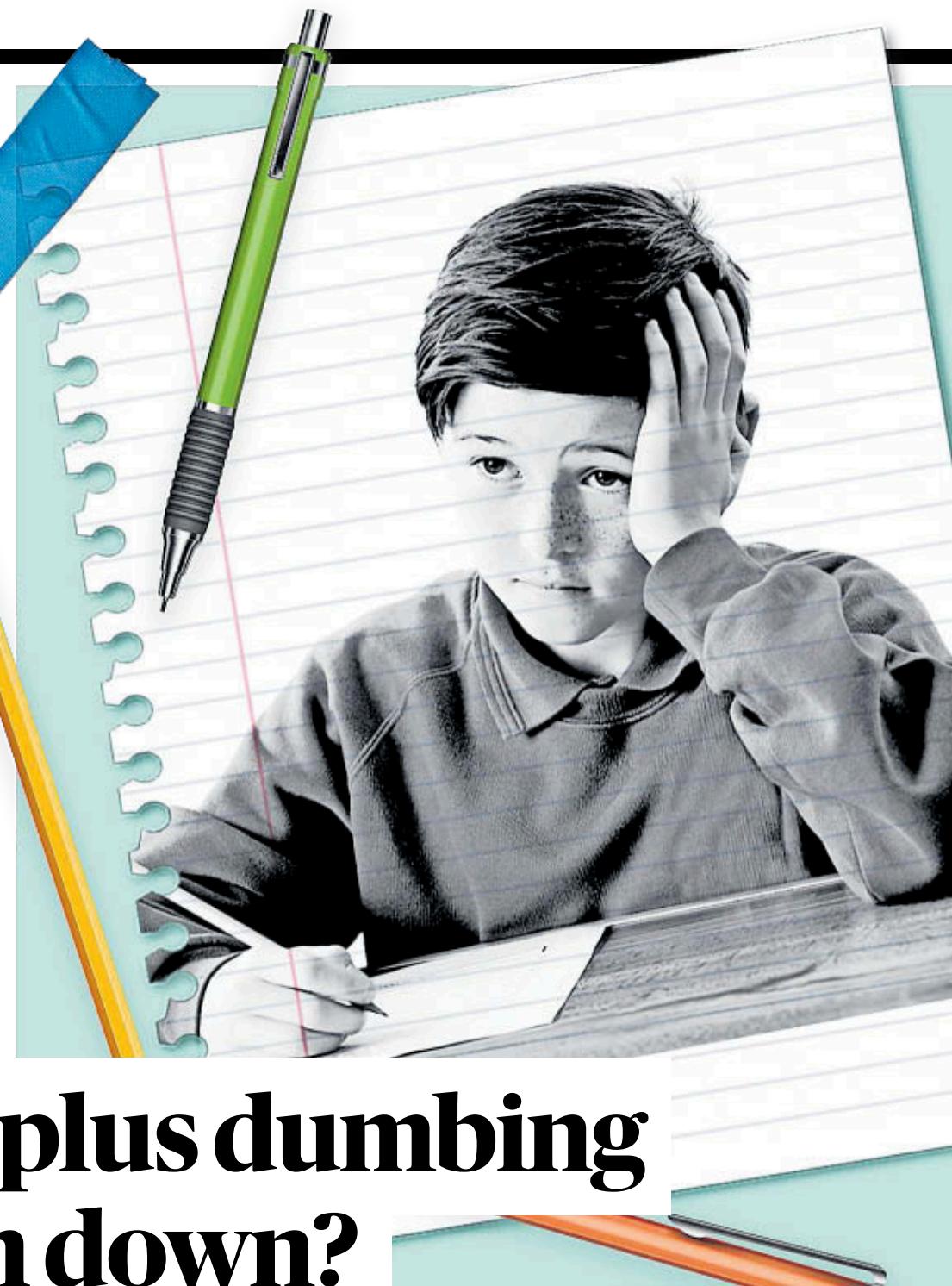
In recent decades, reasoning questions have become a core part of 11-plus testing for selective schools in a bid to identify the most academic children.

However, because non-verbal reasoning (problem-solving using pictures and diagrams) and verbal reasoning (problem-solving with written information) are not routinely taught in state primaries, these tests have fuelled a huge tutoring industry with children spending many hours learning how to answer past papers.

Now there is a growing backlash against this type of testing, which parents, teachers and even tutors say is hindering curiosity and a love of learning, and being taught intensely at the expense of wider reading and learning.

While several grammar schools are now changing the 11-plus exam to focus on the core curriculum, they are in the minority.

Will Orr-Ewing, the founder and director of one of the UK's leading tutoring firms, Keystone Tutors, said that what was once seen as a good way to capture academic ability had now been "gamed".



Is the 11-plus dumbing children down?

The exam is now gamed, turning students into bots and making them less intellectually curious

He added: "It's such an educationally fruitful time of their life and many children are spending 50, 60 hours doing this [reasoning] work, which is not even productive for their long-term growth. It's actually counterproductive. The 11-plus in its current form just turns kids into exam bots, basically."

"We hate tutoring for verbal and non-verbal reasoning. We do it because parents want us to do it and it's effective. But we love teaching maths and English, history and other subjects that have genuine educational value."

"It makes children's thinking narrower, less intellectually curious, more instrumentalist. It's not [that it makes children] less smart, because they're good at doing exams. It's less ... educated, less intelligent."

Orr-Ewing said that secondary schools would ideally look at test results across several years of primary school, "without the drama of an 11-plus pass/fail assessment day". If children performed above a certain level, they could be entered into a lottery for a school place, he suggested.

Expressing his exasperation at the VR and NVR tests, he said: "There's not even that much maths behind [non-verbal reasoning]. With verbal reasoning there's a little bit of vocabulary, which could be helpful, but it's also so fragmented. It doesn't coherently add up to something genuinely useful – unlike, say, just teaching someone really good primary level maths, reading and grammar."

"It's what educationists always decry at GCSEs: cramming short-term knowledge, which is then forgotten the hour after the exam."

Asked what parents should be doing instead to help their children with their learning, Orr-Ewing said: "Learn about the Tudors or have more discussions about books, or do maths for its own sake. Walk around your local area and pick up leaves and try to learn a little bit more about them. Give children the message that the world is an exciting place to learn about."

On the website 11plusanonymous.org, pupils and parents recall their horror stories of getting through the 11-plus tests for grammar and private schools.

One pupil who posted on the website about their experience this year said: "I remember the nights I stayed awake, reviewing practice papers and trying to memorise formulas ... sometimes I wondered if I could handle it all."

Several grammar schools are now making changes in the way they assess who has the greatest potential.

Reading School, a grammar school in Berkshire, has created a new style of admissions process where the subjects tested can change year to year, from geography to history. Maths and English are also tested but only on topics taught in the national curriculum.

Chris Evans, the school's head teacher, warned parents not to make testing too "high stakes" for children.

He said: "A 'grammar school or bust' mentality with tutoring starting at the age of seven produces children who have a functional view of education – simultaneously capable of significant processing while exhibiting less curiosity. Since the 1990s, evidence has shown that non-verbal and verbal reasoning is based on a monolithic view of intelligence."

SAMPLE VERBAL REASONING QUESTION

Find the letters that will complete the series in the best way

CQ DQ EP FP [??]

A GP B GO C HO D GR E GQ

ANSWER EXPLAINED

In this question, the letters are grouped into pairs. The first letter in each pair is in alphabetical order: C, D, E, F. The second letter in each pair features twice in the series, and appears in reverse alphabetical order: Q, Q, P, P. Following this pattern, the next pair of letters after FP must be GO.

Source: The Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools Familiarisation Booklet

RETHINKING THE 11-PLUS

Sample questions for the new style of admissions test for Reading School. It offers its testing to other schools through its Future Stories Community Enterprise.

THINKING LIKE A SCIENTIST

Tom has four tennis balls. He wants each ball to drop at exactly the same speed. Which of these should he do?

- A** Drop each ball in the same way
- B** Give one ball to each of his friends
- C** Throw the ball
- D** Use different types of balls

The correct answer is **A**

THINKING CREATIVELY

This is a bulldog clip. It can be used for holding paper together. Come up with TWO other ideas for what the bulldog clip could be used for instead.



There is no such thing as a wrong answer, but your two ideas should be very different from each other and you should explain how your ideas would work.

THINKING ABOUT PHYSICAL EDUCATION

What does "control" mean when doing a physical activity?

- A** Doing only what your teacher tells you
- B** Moving as fast as possible
- C** Moving carefully and precisely
- D** Running without stopping

The correct answer is **C**

Nine schools are now using Reading's admissions test via its Future Stories Community Enterprise. Evans said: "It tests curiosity and creativity whereas, we think, VR and NVR broadly do the opposite and reward coaching, predictability and parental investment."

Charles Bonas, the founder of Bonas MacFarlane, a tutoring agency started in 1992, believes many independent schools have a similar issue with overly prescriptive entrance exams that exclude different thinkers.

"We are at risk of building a cohort of children who've got quite similar cognitive profiles, who can process really quickly, have good working memories and can concentrate at a given time. You're closing the door to visual thinkers who come up with some of the most interesting ideas."

He said that, in an ideal world, private school admissions teams would visit schools to meet pupils, see their class work and speak to their teachers.

At Wellington College, the prestigious £62,250-a-year boarding school in Berkshire, prospective pupils do take a reasoning test but they attend a team-building day as well so that teachers can observe how the pupils interact with others. They are also asked for a school report.

James Dahl, the headmaster at Wellington, said: "It's a much more time-consuming process, but it means you're not simply converting children to a number on a spreadsheet and ranking them from highest to lowest."

"You can have children who might come just below that artificial line on the spreadsheet who are just the most incredible young people, who are kind and resilient and whose personality really fits what you're trying to do as a school."

Greater London

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27

Schools in London continue to outperform those in the rest of the UK, and more than a third of the national top 100 are in the capital.

Topping the Parent Power league table with the best results is the centuries-old institution St Paul's School, named the overall **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence** and **Independent Secondary School of the Year in London for Academic Excellence**. The corridors at the southwest London school are lined with whiteboards containing maths puzzles to be solved by anyone who picks up the pen.

"This is the cohort who joined during the pandemic; they lived through one of the toughest points in British education history and received the best results in the school's history," Sally-Anne Huang, the head master, says. At A-level 98 per cent of grades were A*-B, and 97.7 per cent of GCSE results were graded 9-7.

Here, high achievement does not come at the expense of happiness. Since 2020 the school, whose former pupils include the diarist Samuel Pepys, the neurologist Oliver Sacks and the former chancellor George Osborne, has introduced a vertical house system, boosted co-curricular opportunities and is launching a research centre into the education of boys.

"This next generation will all have to be problem-solvers," Huang says. "Our job is to prepare them for a different – and difficult – world in which they will live."

A similar focus on equipping boys for an uncertain future, underpinned with support, has helped Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet to claim a record five awards: **State Secondary School of the Year**, **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence**, **State Secondary School of the Year for A-levels**, **State Secondary School of the Year in London** and **State Secondary School of the Year in London for Academic Excellence**.

The school was founded in 1573 at the request of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, a favourite of Elizabeth I. The queen granted a royal charter for the establishment of "one common grammar school, in or near the town of Barnet ... for the education, bringing up and instruction of boys and youth ... and the same to continue for ever".

The campus includes a 25m swimming pool, a music recital hall, a robotics suite, refurbished laboratories and a 200-seat drama studio. Among its 115 societies and clubs, many created by the pupils, are an animation group, zoology group and mock trial teams. Sixth-formers



Earning their stripes: St Paul's School in southwest London

complete 40 hours of community service every year. "There's a laser focus on delivering this mission statement to produce young men who are confident, able and responsible," Neil Enright, the headmaster, says. "The biggest priority is ensuring that you have systems in place to know every child – 1,321 to be precise –

on an individual basis, so they have at least one adult they feel they can turn to."

Last year 49 pupils secured places at Oxford and Cambridge universities. Others took up degree apprenticeships at companies such as Amazon and Deloitte.

Continued on page 8 ➔

Making Waves since 1850

North London
Collegiate School

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SCHOOL OF THE YEAR
LONDON

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SECONDARY SCHOOL
OF THE YEAR

Parent Power

→ Continued from page 7

"I am often asked whether this success is down to having a great Oxbridge coordinator – that's nonsense," Enright says. "It's about creating the right climate. We teach our children they need to be self-starters. They're not on a conveyor belt; they're going to be supported and encouraged to think really deeply from 11 and 12 years old, but they are the ones that need to work hard, identify the opportunities and seize them."

Past pupils include Sir Demis Hassabis and Mustafa Suleyman, whose AI company DeepMind was acquired by Google in 2014. One of the most famous alumnae of North London Collegiate School (NLCS), the UK's oldest academic girls' school, returned for a visit in November: Dame Anna Wintour, who was editor-in-chief of American Vogue for 37 years.

"She gave the most incredible talk and it was a real honour to have her. The girls were in raptures listening to her stories," says Vicky Bingham, headmistress of NLCS. It wins three titles as our

Independent Secondary School of the Year, Independent Secondary School of the Year in London and Independent International Baccalaureate Secondary School of the Year.

The visit was part of the school's Senior Societies programme, for which students book the speakers. Bingham believes Wintour encapsulates the "spirit of challenging" the world, which endures at the school 60 years after she left. "The ethos of the school and our strapline is:

'Making waves since 1850,'" Bingham says. "We want to give the very bright young women in our care the opportunities and the confidence to help them make positive change in the world and to believe that when they leave school they really can do anything. But they also do so with a lovely sense of humility."

They're not assuming they're going to win – they make sure they do."

A close relationship with universities and businesses has given King's Maths School, the State Sixth Form College of the Year for Academic Excellence, a top-class edge beyond the A-level curriculum. Guest lectures at the school in Lambeth, south London, demonstrate to students the real-life applications of the mathematics they learn.

"It also helps that we are, as a whole, unashamedly enthusiastic about maths and related subjects," Timothy Bateup, the head teacher, says. The results speak for themselves: 97.1 per cent of students achieved AAB or higher, including two or more facilitating subjects, in 2024.

But it's not work all the time. Every Friday afternoon is clear for sport. Cultural activities and trips are encouraged.

The school is expanding its free-to-attend outreach programmes, aiming to increase access for more young people from across London, particularly those represented in mathematical subjects.

Wilson's School in Sutton is awarded State Secondary School of the Year for GCSEs. It prioritises offering a well-rounded experience, so all year 7 pupils are given a free musical instrument to

play, from year 9 small tutor groups discuss current affairs, and lunchtime activities include building satellites. It has been proudly smartphone-free among the younger pupils for nearly two decades, says the head teacher, Nathan Cole.

"It's about effectively preparing pupils to talk – small talk and public speaking – and write so they can adapt for anything in the future," Cole says. Teachers have to know their subjects "inside out" and combine that knowledge with a "sense of humility and thoughtfulness".

Competition on the sports field may have helped the West London Free School in Hammersmith to move up the league tables, despite the fact it "does not have a blade of grass". Pupils at the

Comprehensive School of the Year and Comprehensive School of the Year in London play sport for two-and-a-half hours one morning every week.

"It's not a curriculum subject; it's just really good for a sense of belonging – it builds a sense of community," Robert Peal, joint head teacher, says. "We show what can be done with essentially an office block and an old Georgian villa. If you've got the right ideas and the right people, you can build a good school anywhere."

Excellent results are as much a byproduct as a goal, Peal says. "The most important thing is giving pupils a love of learning. We're not an exam factory; we're not doing exam preparation from day one of year 12; we're teaching subjects in a really enthusiastic,



passionate way." Ben McLaughlin, also joint head teacher, describes the school as "warm strict", with clear behaviour expectations and consequences, such as detentions, in place. "We take our moral duty to raise good people seriously, so lots of what we do is about building them up and building resilience and tenacity," McLaughlin says. "We also attract and retain excellent staff. An inspirational teacher can really change the direction of a young person's life."

Nicola Tikare, acting head teacher at Palmers Green High School in North Finchley, the Independent 11-16 School of the Year for Academic Excellence, agrees that the right student-teacher relationship can make all the difference. "Palmers Green High [has] such a small, close-knit community, and that element of nurturing and family," Tikare says. "We're able to therefore push those academics, and in a supportive way."

Community collaboration is to the fore at the State Faith Secondary School of the Year. Founded in 1732 as the Jews' Free School (JFS), a small charity school in the East End of London, JFS has grown to become one of the biggest schools in the country and the largest Jewish secondary school in Europe.

The thriving co-ed comprehensive based in Harrow, northwest London, has jumped 22 places in our national league table and is second-highest ranked comprehensive in the capital. It's a dramatic turnaround for the school that was rated inadequate and put into special measures by Ofsted in 2021, before David Moody became head teacher. He is the

TOP 10 IN LONDON

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet (1, national rank)
- 2 North London Collegiate School 3
- 3 St Olave's Grammar School 4
- 4 The Tiffin Girls' School 5
- 5 The Henrietta Barnett School 8
- 6 Tiffin School 11
- 7 The Latymer School 18
- 8 Sutton Grammar School 21
- 9 St Michael's RC Grammar School, Finchley 22
- 10 Wallington High School for Girls 24

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 St Paul's School 1 (1, national rank)
- 2 Wilson's School 2
- 3 St Olave's Grammar School 3
- 4 The Tiffin Girls' School 5
- 5 King's College School, Wimbledon 7
- 6 Westminster School 8
- 7 Lady Eleanor Holles 9
- 8 City of London School for Girls 10
- 9 Latymer Upper School 11
- 10 Alleyn's School 13

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

- 1 West London Free School (44, national rank)
- 2 JFS 59
- 3 Camden School for Girls 84
- 4 The Charter School, North Dulwich 96
- 5 The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School 97
- 6 Waldegrave School, Twickenham 99
- 7 Twyford CofE High School 107
- 8 Hasmonean High School for Girls 108
- 9 Mossbourne Community Academy 113-
- 10 JCoss (Jewish Community Secondary School) 118

first non-Jewish head teacher in the school's nearly 300-year history.

A more detailed intervention programme, which includes students working with teachers before and after school and a focus on revision resources, has improved outcomes.

"I want us to maintain the academic standard, but above everything I want kindness," Moody says. "The rise in

antisemitism over the past two years has put pressure on the school community. It's really tough. You watch kids walking down to the bus stops and they're getting all sorts of words thrown at them. A natural response is to hunker down, but I think our job is to make the children see that there's a world full of love out there." Helen Davies, Louise Eccles and Hannah Swerling

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TOP 5 INDEPENDENT SECONDARY SCHOOL FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Parent Power



Southeast

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23

Learning how to be curious and ambitious and daring to be different are at the root of record-breaking results at schools across the southeast. Teachers here, including Chris Evans, head of Reading School in Berkshire, believe pupils shouldn't have to choose between high

achievement and happiness. "We want all our students to make a difference in society," Evans says. "We're not interested in what A*s they get. We want to know, will they be good fathers and brothers? Will they be good colleagues? I don't think that happens by accident." Certainly not

Nonsuch High School for Girls, left, and Brighton College, which has won a hat-trick of awards

at the 900-year-old grammar school, our **State Secondary School of the Year in the Southeast for Academic Excellence**, which has a "head of character". He spends most of his time delivering a bespoke curriculum called the Floreat programme, which covers areas such as team skills, boys' sense of who they are, an understanding of thinking and learning processes, awareness of others, and leadership. Non-national curriculum subjects chosen by students are also timetabled, from street dance, bridge and manga to lacrosse, climbing, canoeing and anthropology.

"Students shouldn't grow up in an environment where they see themselves having to trample over each other to get the best grades," Evans says. "Instead, in our classrooms we try to foster (through our house system as much as anything else) a sense that everyone gets involved. Where leaders are generous and model compassion, you see classrooms of boys being that."

The school is attempting to bring that sense of fairness into its admissions too. This year it changed the entrance test to cover mostly Key Stage 2 content and scrapped the non-verbal reasoning element. There are also proposals to give priority to pupils who attend local state primary schools and to move the 11-plus to July from September, to allow children



to spend their summer playing instead of cramming for the test. Evans says: "The 11-plus shouldn't be seen as a torturous injustice, but a profound opportunity to raise up those who most benefit from it."

Hannah Nemko, head teacher of Dame Alice Owen's, a partially selective school in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, insists its intake "really is comprehensive", with the number of pupils on education, health and care plans (EHCPs) or coming from disadvantaged backgrounds doubling in the past five years. A third of its pupils secure a place at the school through their academic credentials.

This summer 89.1 per cent of its pupils' A-level grades were A*-B and 72.1 per cent of GCSEs were grades 9-7 – results that place the school 26th in the state league table and 111th in the combined rankings. It wins **Comprehensive School of the Year for Academic Excellence** and **Comprehensive School of the Year in the Southeast**.

Pedagogy is paramount. "We teach [teachers] about the science of learning and bring the pupils into the process," Nemko says. "We talk a lot about the 'Owens Way': opportunity for all; window on the world; excellence in everything; never stop learning."

Top marks at Nonsuch High School for Girls – where 89.2 per cent of A-level grades achieved were A*-B – have helped the selective school in Cheam take the title of **State Secondary School of the Year in the Southeast**. It jumped 29 places to break into the national top 20 (33rd) and it ranks second in the region, with 94 per cent of pupils securing a

TOP 10 SOUTHEAST

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 Reading School (10, national rank)
- 2 Nonsuch High School for Girls 13
- 3 Tonbridge Grammar School 14
- 4 Dartford Grammar School 15
- 5 The Judd School 19
- 6 Dr Challoner's High School 25
- 7 Dame Alice Owen's School 26
- 8 Kendrick School 28
- 9 Langley Grammar School 29
- 10 Dr Challoner's Grammar School 39

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 Brighton College (2, national rank)
- 2 Guildford High School 5
- 3 Eton College 14
- 4 Sevenoaks School 15
- 5 Wycombe Abbey 18
- 6 Magdalen College School 20
- 7 Royal Grammar School, Guildford 22
- 8 Winchester College 26
- 9 Tonbridge School 28
- 10 Reigate Grammar School 29

strong foundations and effective partnerships with parents. It's more important as the intake diversifies."

Tracking data is key to a more personalised approach. During the past two years, the school's use of digital platforms and tracking analysis has helped it to pinpoint pupils and the areas in which they need extra support, for example in chemistry and biology. Next the school plans to teach critical thinking at a younger age and introduce the higher project qualification (HPQ) at GCSE level.

Williamson-Jones is a passionate advocate for girls' schools. "Girls learn differently from boys," she says. "The approach is more collaborative, and a single-sex environment allows for more leadership positions and [pupils] are more confident to use their voice in the classroom. They want to change the world."

Guildford High School, the

Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Southeast, balances hard work with fun such as competitive games of Hungry Hippos between rival houses.

Karen Laurie, who became the head teacher in 2023, says: "We encourage our pupils to work hard, but also to enjoy every minute, to get involved in school life and not drop their music, their sport, their drama, their debating, their crocheting, or whatever, to focus on their A-levels. There's a sense that you can do both here and you should do both."

Academic enrichment sessions are timetabled and explore themes such as "links between the classical world and

modern US politics" and "a brief history of human rights". Its clubs and activities include escape rooms, journalism, rock bands, Lega league and printmaking.

Abbot's Hill School, in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, is our **Independent 11-16 School of the Year**. Sharon Schanschaff, the head teacher, says: "We've done quite a lot of work on tracking and giving attention to every single child's intervention, clinics, stretch and challenge work."

In 2006 Brighton College was 147th in the Parent Power independent school league table. In 2011 it broke into the top 20, and today it wins the awards of **Independent Boarding School of the Year**, **Independent Coeducational Secondary School of the Year** and **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Southeast for Academic Excellence**.

"The consistently excellent results stem from a laser-like focus on recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers coupled with a relentless championing of kindness," says Richard Cairns, principal of the Brighton College family of schools, which is set to expand overseas.

Cairns has zeroed in on the "missing middle" – those who do not fit into the high achievers – and those who struggle, as well as championing the introverts.

"Children who are treated with kindness and respect by other children are happy children. And happy children will always achieve more than anyone ever thought possible."

Helen Davies, Louise Eccles, Julie Henry and Mashaal Hussain

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Parent Power

Southwest

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17

The best A-level results in the school's history have led to Churston Ferrers Grammar School breaking into the Parent Power national top 100 and being awarded **Highly Commended State Secondary School of the Year**. Churston Ferrers, in Torbay, Devon – one of the more disadvantaged areas in England, and one of only two coeducational grammars in the region – rose almost 150 places to rank 78th nationally thanks to outstanding A-level and GCSE results.

James Simpson, the head teacher, is unashamedly aspirational for the school, which he joined two years ago. He banned smartphones in his first fortnight in charge. "The school has a reputation as a caring and compassionate school," he says. "I want to preserve the culture but aim a little bit higher. Together we can make a real difference. I want us to move from good to exceptional."

Social mobility and community responsibility are also key motivators for Nathan Jenkins, the head teacher of Ralph Allen School in Bath. Jenkins, who took up the role two years ago, is proud of his "proper comprehensive full of all ages and abilities", which is named **Comprehensive School of the Year in the Southwest**. Pupils have requested

Athletics at South Wilts Grammar School in Salisbury, the region's top state secondary



to join "period zero", a 20-minute session of targeted support for science, English and maths before the school day begins. They are also required to read four novels a year.

South Wilts Grammar School in Salisbury has also climbed the ranks, jumping more than 50 places to 45th in the national table and taking the title of **State Secondary School of the Year in the Southwest**. Children come from as far away as Southampton, Warminster and Romsey to find their passion in clubs, from Zen Zone to astronomy to Dungeons & Dragons. "Pupils can be who they want

to be, and be ambitious," says Dr Amanda Smith, the head teacher, who has been in post for a year.

She says the roots of the school's recent success – 37 per cent of A-level grades were A*-A; 78 per cent of GCSEs were grades 7-9 – were embedded long ago.

"The core values are kind,

be involved, be aspirational and the golden threads woven throughout the school are equality, diversity, inclusivity and literacy."

Since he became head teacher of Pate's Grammar School in 2023, James Richardson has understood the DNA of the selective powerhouse: the curriculum is flexible and robust, the teaching is rigorous and the house system is the heart and soul of the Cheltenham school. Now he wants to redefine the admissions process, identifying children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who could thrive at the **State Secondary School of the Year in the Southwest for Academic Excellence**.

It may be the only state school with an outdoor learning department, which has grown in significance since restrictions on smartphone use have tightened. The next innovation is "wilderness week", where pupils can "experience silence and reconnect with values of friendship". Qualifications alone no longer cut it: "It is about identifying the joy of learning for passion's sake," he says. "This is what will give our

TOP 10 SOUTHWEST

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 Pate's Grammar School (6, national rank)
- 2 Colyton Grammar School 20
- 3 Sir Thomas Rich's School 32
- 4 South Wilts Grammar School 45
- 5 Stroud High School 67
- 6 Bishop Wordsworth's School 68
- 7 Churston Ferrers Grammar School 78
- 8 Parkstone Grammar School 115
- 9 Bournemouth School 122
- 10 Torquay Girls' Grammar School 125

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 Cheltenham Ladies' College (62, national rank)
- 2 King Edward's School, Bath 70
- 3 Redmaids' High School 86
- 4 The Maynard School 94=
- 5 Marlborough College 112=
- 6 Canford School 112=
- 7 King Edward VI School, Southampton 114
- 8 St Mary's Calne 123
- 9 Exeter School 127
- 10 Royal High School Bath, GDST 130

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students the edge in a world we cannot yet imagine."

There is also a focus on the future at King Edward's School, Bath, our **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Southwest**. "We talk a lot about failure," Martin Boden, the headmaster, says. "It's a balancing act to encourage ambition and success but also know that it's OK to get it wrong and it's OK if it doesn't go right all the time."

In 2025 90 per cent of A-levels were at A*-B and 76.6 per cent of GCSEs were graded 7-9. Pupils gained places at Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities, and the Royal Northern College of Music as well as on degree apprenticeships at AstraZeneca and Deloitte.

"If students are happy, engaged and feel validated, they bring that into the classroom," he says. "Excelling on the playing field – the boys team won the Rosslyn Park Sevens, a student won Bath Musician of the Year and the performance of *Macbeth* was spectacular – brings energy."

The ambition is simply to do your best, Boden says: "Adolescence is more complex and more personal than ever and academic success comes from mutual support. 'Peer ethos' is the most important. It is cool to be clever and have ambitions outside the classroom. You look out for your friends and enjoy their success."

Success is standard at Cheltenham Ladies' College, the **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Southwest for Academic Excellence**,



where annual boarding fees start at £60,300.

A new sixth form centre is planned to open in 2026 and will include an employability suite, learning pods, wellbeing and relaxation zones, and collaborative learning spaces.

"We have to evolve to ensure that we are best equipping pupils for the future," says Dr David Gamblin, vice principal academic at the school. "We are preparing them for the workforce of the 2030s, the 2040s, and beyond."

The curriculum plays a big part in this. For example, a course called Da Vinci: The Art of Thinking blends "science, art, philosophy and problem-solving, encouraging pupils to make connections across disciplines and approach ideas with curiosity and imagination", while Project Green is where pupils pitch sustainable business ideas, developing confidence, collaboration and real-world leadership skills.

Students can also foster their passions and test their skills at the Devil's

Advocates Club, the Global Citizens Club, the Hot Potatoes PSHE Club (to discuss sensitive, difficult or embarrassing issues), and the Dream Lab, where psychology meets neuroscience and your nightly adventures get a scientific spotlight.

Every year at Torquay Boys' Grammar School, the **International Baccalaureate State School of the Year 2026**, year 13 students host a knowledge café for younger pupils, setting up stalls in the main hall and asking questions such as: "What role does imagination play in producing knowledge about the world?", "Are some things unknowable?" and, "Should some knowledge be sought on ethical grounds?"

"Underpinning everything is the art of inquiry," Dr James Hunt, the head teacher, says. "Our school motto is 'Dare to be', and our educators encourage students to step out of their comfort zone, embrace curiosity and the new, and love becoming better, more informed learners."

The selective school has a wide catchment, with pupils travelling from Exeter and Plymouth, and is in a "fairly deprived" area. Hunt believes the decision by the Labour government to stop additional funding to IB schools is "shortsighted". "Excellent exam performance is an outcome rather than a goal. If you teach resilience, intellectual curiosity, if you work around personal and student development, then the results fall into place," he says.

Helen Davies



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Parent Power

Meet the therapy dogs helping children to read

From easing stammers to boosting confidence, here's how furry friends like Pickle and Beck are making a difference

Louise Eccles, Education and Early Years Editor

Grahame Shally, a retired design and technology teacher from North Duffield, North Yorkshire, regularly visits schools with his 11-year-old cockapoo, Beck. Beck is also retired, after serving as an ambassador for Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, for which he was trained to alert people to important sounds.

"The children read with Beck's paw or chin on their knees and it calms them," Shally, 72, says. "We had one child who came to us and read beautifully to Beck. It was only as we walked out that the school secretary said, 'How did he get on?' She said the child had a very bad stammer and struggled to read aloud – but he had never stumbled once when reading for Beck."

However, charities say that they are in desperate need of more volunteer dogs as thousands of schools seek the benefits amid a reading crisis. And applying for the role may be easier than you think.

Sleepy, older dogs with absolutely no ability to perform tricks or follow complex commands are as welcome as young, high-performing show dogs. The main requirement is that your dog loves attention even when meeting strangers in new places.

Pets As Therapy has 2,100 Read2Dogs teams (the volunteer and the dog) working

demand is far outstripping supply. Charities such as Pets As Therapy say that having a calm, often sleeping, dog in a library or classroom helps to create a relaxed and homely environment that makes children feel more comfortable reading books aloud, in a group or to themselves.

Time spent with the dogs can also be used as a reward for children who attend reading sessions, and can help to create a positive association with books and reading, experts add.

He adds: "Dogs have an infectious calming effect that can help with reading, but it is also motivational. The children want to stay reading so they can be with the dog."

"We want every school that asks for this support to receive it, and with more volunteers we can make that a reality, but demand currently outstrips supply every month."

The dogs have also been used in secondary schools to help with attendance and encourage pupils to return to school. One girl who had been off for five months with an eating disorder was told that if she came into school on Wednesdays, she could spend time with the dog.

The actress Cathy Shipton, who played Duffy in the BBC medical drama *Casualty*, volunteers with her dog Pickle, a ten-year-old whippet and collie cross breed, around Buckinghamshire in a primary school, nursery and local library.

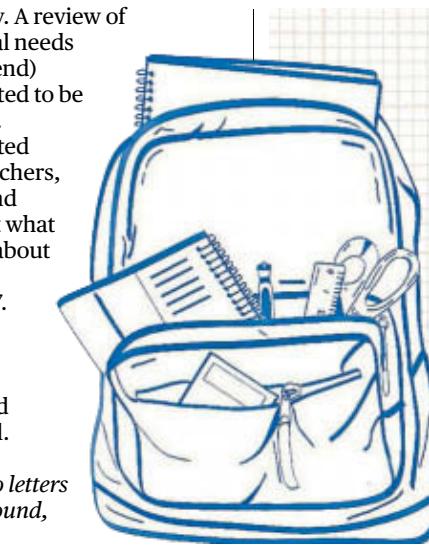
"His presence is like a distraction technique," she says. "I have met children who will look at the ground or shake when they are asked to read aloud. But within a couple of weeks they are enjoying the sessions because it doesn't feel like a conventional classroom. They will be stroking Pickle or playing gently with his ear, and they are sitting calmly and enjoying the

diversity of society. A review of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision is expected to be published in 2026.

We have consulted teachers, head teachers, SEND specialists and parents to find out what you should know about each stage, from reception to year 7. Here's how best to prepare yourself and your child, so they can thrive and be happy at school. *A digraph is a combination of two letters representing one sound, such as "ph".*

what a digraph* is. So how can you prepare for the next step?

All schools are different and independent schools don't have to follow the national curriculum, although many use it as a benchmark. Note too that a year-long review of the curriculum was published in November, with the government planning to overhaul primary school grammar lessons and design studies to better reflect the



Children love reading more because they associate it with Pickle



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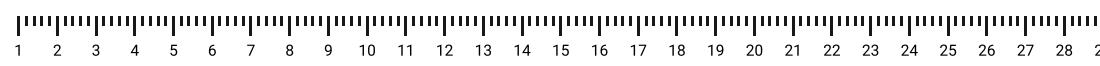


Children love reading more because they associate it with Pickle

Parent Power



East Midlands



Andrew Holman is happy at Nottingham High School – so much so that after a previous stint as a maths teacher and head of year 7, he has returned as headmaster this year. “I’ve worked here before,” he says. “I love the school so much that I came back for another go.”

Founded in 1513, the co-educational school – which runs more than 120 clubs a week, has a swimming pool and fields, and charges from £7,461 a term – celebrated its best GCSE performance

with 67.3 per cent of grades 8 and 9, and 69 per cent of grades at A-level A*-A. The result? Nottingham High School has risen in the national table to break into the top 50 schools in the country and is awarded the double: **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the East Midlands** and **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the East Midlands for Academic Excellence**.

“Academic excellence is at the heart of what we do, but the curriculum needs

Laser focus: science at St Mary's Catholic High School, Chesterfield

to adapt to what our kids need – such as embracing new technologies,” Holman says. He is clear-eyed about the years to come in the independent sector. “The market is changing a lot post-VAT. We need to be ready to look at our locale – at partnerships, at what other schools are doing. We’re not complacent.”

He adds: “My vision for the school is to reach beyond the bounds of the city. We’re keen to look at bringing in kids from a wider area and will be looking at

expanding bus routes to facilitate this.” About 40 miles away in Chesterfield, Maria Dengate, the headteacher of St Mary’s Catholic High School, runs a network of ten buses so that the comprehensive school could continue to educate those living in more disadvantaged local areas when the council stopped providing transport.

Getting children into school is key. If pupils are struggling, the message is clear: “Just come to school.” From there, her

team will “go to any lengths to help”, she says. She is uncompromising about attendance, as researchers from the Department for Education observed recently when they visited her school, with its “holy trinity of very high attendance, high outcomes and very low exclusions”.

Dengate’s approach is working. This summer 64 per cent of A-level grades were A*-B grades and 42.5 per cent grades 9 to 7 at GCSE, with eight pupils securing a place at Oxford and Cambridge. The school has about 18 per cent of pupils on free school meals, and two years ago a pupil on a Sutton Trust pathway won a fully funded scholarship to the Ivy League Harvard University in the US. “We’re massively aspirational,” says Dengate, who is proud of her subject-specialist staff too. “Without them, you wouldn’t change these children’s lives.”

Rising 15 places year on year to rank 220th in the main league table and fifth in the region, St Mary’s is awarded **Comprehensive of the Year in the East Midlands**. It is a fitting win for a school whose motto is *Inauro*, or “To coat in gold”. “Success breeds success,” Dengate says.

Investment in pastoral care includes opening access to external counselling services, while initiatives such as Wellbeing Wednesday, in which students are taught how to manage anxiety, and a “culture of praise” allow teachers to push pupils academically. In preparation for GCSEs pupils take pre-public exams each year, in which they sit two sessions of tests in the hall and under exam conditions.

Cassery says: “We can’t be in a position where we are saying to the girls, ‘Oh never mind, you have disadvantages.’” Instead, with every decision she asks, “Is this right for the girls? If we don’t feel it adds value, we don’t do it.”

Single-sex schools excel in the UK’s second city. King Edward VI High School for Girls (KEHS), Birmingham, wins **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands** for **Academic Excellence** after record GCSE results. The average class size is 21 up to GCSE, and up to 16 for A-levels.

“People will perhaps wrongly assume that KEHS must be a ‘hothouse’,” Kirsty von Malaisé, the chief master and principal, says. “Anyone who visits the school knows that this is demonstrably untrue. We focus first and foremost on creating a supportive, inclusive environment in which pupils flourish.”

Subjects introduced to add to the academic breadth and intellectual liveliness of the school over the past five years include A-level politics, GCSE and A-level PE, and GCSE Mandarin. A modern design centre, opened in 2023, has enabled KEHS to introduce GCSE and A-level computer science. Other new facilities include a gallery space and an

art library. Academic success is consistently rewarded, von Malaisé says, and the co-curricular programme is equally vital to pupils’ school experience.

There are clubs for almost every interest and passion, and indoor nets plus coaching opportunities mean KEHS is regularly named among the country’s top 20 girls’ schools for cricket. The school in one word? “Inspiring.”

The headmaster Bennett Carr is also keen to dispel that his boys’ grammar school with a co-ed sixth form is an “exam factory”. After taking the joint No 1 spot in the happiest schools ranking, produced from an analysis of Ofsted data by The Sunday Times, King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, has been crowned **State Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands** and **State Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands for Academic Excellence**.

“I once said in a parents’ evening that I want pupils to be happy and successful, in that order, because you are not truly successful if you are not happy,” Carr says.

The house system fosters trust and a sense of belonging. “It is like a family unit and it works brilliantly. Pupils know one another, there is no sense of ‘We’re year 10 and we don’t talk to year 9’. It really breaks down those barriers. You see them saying hello to each other in the corridors.”

Talented and dedicated staff oversee an extensive programme of sports, clubs and societies.

Set in the centre of Stratford-upon-Avon, the school campus is an ensemble of medieval buildings rubbing up against Victorian and more modern elements. The 13th-century chapel is used weekly. At “Shakespeare’s school”, pupils are still taught each morning in the classroom where the young Bard had lessons. In the afternoon it is open to the public.

“We have wall paintings that were painted over by Shakespeare’s father, John – you can see coming through the whitewash the tail of St George’s dragon,” Carr says. “We have this living piece of history in the corner.”

Helen Davies and Julie Henry

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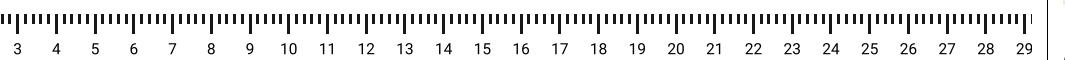
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AMBITION - OPPORTUNITY - COMMUNITY

West Midlands



There are no excuses at St Paul’s School for Girls in Edgbaston, which has won **Comprehensive School of the Year in the West Midlands**.

The Catholic secondary school, where one in five students has SEND requirements and more than a third come from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or have English as a second language, takes the title after 72 per cent of pupils gained A*-B at A-level and 42 per cent achieved grades 9-7 in their GCSEs in the summer.

The head teacher Dawn Cassery was once a pupil, and she’s not the only one: 21 members of her staff are Old Girls.

Cassery says: “We can’t be in a position where we are saying to the girls, ‘Oh never mind, you have disadvantages.’” Instead, with every decision she asks, “Is this right for the girls? If we don’t feel it adds value, we don’t do it.”

Investment in pastoral care includes opening access to external counselling services, while initiatives such as Wellbeing Wednesday, in which students are taught how to manage anxiety, and a “culture of praise” allow teachers to push pupils academically. In preparation for GCSEs pupils take pre-public exams each year, in which they sit two sessions of tests in the hall and under exam conditions.

As well as I30 trips, a series of “deep learning days” helps to make the curriculum come alive.

“Children are encouraged to develop their passions by celebrating the small steps,” Andrew Wright, the co-head teacher, says. “We want them to see that each step you are taking is worth celebrating. It is about inching closer and putting in the work, because taking those first small steps and keeping going is more valuable to the children than the big victory at the end of it.”

The message that it is cool to be clever is equally evident at the all-boys grammar school the King’s School, Grantham – winner of **State Secondary School of the Year in the East Midlands** and **State Secondary School of the Year in the East Midlands for Academic Excellence**. Identifiable thanks to their blue-red-blue ties, pupils are a fixture in the Lincolnshire town and can often be seen walking to and from their sports pitches along the residential streets.

A great deal of focus is placed on

exceptional academic achievement, according to Simon Pickett, the headmaster. In 2025, 47 per cent of all A-level grades were at A*-A, and 70 per cent at A*-B, while a record 63 per cent of GCSEs achieved grades 7-9.

“We talk to the boys in the early part

of their career [here] about having aspirations to go to Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, and getting them to buy into the great history of doing that,” Pickett says. Last year, ten boys went to Oxford and Cambridge, this year it was 11: “We are hoping to have more again next summer.”

He adds: “We celebrate everything

we can. You can be exceptional at rugby, English or Combined Cadet Force – it’s not cliquey. It is about finding passions that they can build on throughout their lives.”

“[Old boy] Isaac Newton’s first law

tells us that an object in motion stays in motion. Our A-level and Oxbridge results are evidence of that principle – you create momentum, you give them that momentum, and they will take that forward.”

Eleanor Doughty

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SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 King Edward VI School, Stratford (12, national rank)
- 2 King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls 17
- 3 Stratford Girls’ Grammar School 27
- 4 King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys 40
- 5 Bishop Vesey’s Grammar School 41
- 6 Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls 49
- 7 King Edward VI Five Ways School 54
- 8 Wolverhampton Girls’ High School 61
- 9 Newport Girls’ High School 66
- 10 Rugby High School 88

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 King Edward VI High School for Girls, Birmingham (11, national rank)
- 2 Concord College 31
- 3 King Edward’s School, Birmingham 41
- 4 Solihull School 94
- 5 Warwick School 117
- 6 RGS Worcester 119
- 7 Newcastle-under-Lyme School 134
- 8 Bromsgrove School 139
- 9 Bablake School 161
- 9 King Henry VIII School 161



Parent Power

East Anglia

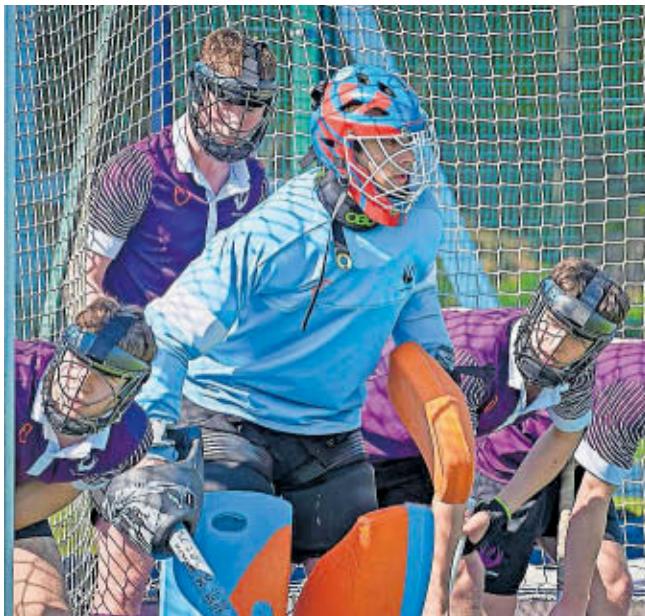
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Arrive before lessons at Colchester County High School for Girls and you will see a queue of pupils waiting for the swimming pool to open. Occasional morning yoga sessions help to ease exam nerves and lunchtimes are when pupils make a beeline for dodgeball club or the gym. By the summer term, three padel courts will be ready for matches – it's one way to help with conversational Spanish.

All that energy expended on physical activities creates a calm, focused and high-achieving learning environment in the classroom. An outstanding exam performance in the summer – 83 per cent of pupils gained A*-B at A-level and 85 per cent achieved grades 9-7 at GCSE – led to a 74-place rise in the national league table to rank 23rd, and the school takes the title of **State Secondary School of the Year in East Anglia**.

“Girls learn from day one here not to set limitations in their own minds,” Gillian Marshall, the executive principal, says.

Its success is echoed by its male counterpart. Colchester Royal Grammar School (CRGS) is the **State Secondary**



School of the Year in East Anglia for Academic Excellence and ranks fourth in the national league table. Steeped in centuries of history, CRGS prides itself on its “traditional values” with “a modern outlook”. Its boys “move on to the best institutions across the world”, the head teacher, John Russell, says.

It is one of 29 state boarding schools in the country (charging £6,350 a term in the co-ed sixth form), a fact Russell believes “adds to our wonderfully diverse student body”. Clubs include Japanese and technophysics, and a heated pool and gym are among extensive sports facilities.

End goal: a love of learning is instilled in pupils at The Perse School in Cambridge

The global perspective of the IB curriculum has helped Impington Village College, near Cambridge, to be named **Comprehensive School of the Year in East Anglia** for a consecutive year, despite a slip from 78th to 150th place in the overall league table. The IB teaches pupils “resilience, critical thinking and communication skills”, Jo Sale, the principal, says. An “international-mindedness” is evident at the school, which offers five language choices at GCSE and more in the sixth form.

Despite being Cambridge’s oldest secondary school, The Perse School today teaches pupils about the ethics of modern-day AI. Such breadth in the curriculum as well as outstanding results has helped it to break into the top 30 independent schools and take the titles of **Independent Secondary School of the Year in East Anglia** and **Independent Secondary School of the Year in East Anglia for Academic Excellence**.

Particularly impressive results were recorded in ancient history, Chinese, music, physics and history, with 93 per cent of A-levels graded A*-B, and 90 per cent of GCSEs grades 9-7.

Ed Elliott, the head teacher, is keen to stress that perfectionism is not the end goal. “Our four values – endeavour, intellectual curiosity and scholarship, breadth and balance, and one another and our environment – permeate everything we do. I love meeting alumni in their sixties, seventies, eighties, who still have a love of learning and are still asking questions.”

Zoe Dare Hall

TOP 10 EAST ANGLIA

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 Colchester Royal Grammar School (4, national rank)
- 2 King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford 7
- 3 Chelmsford County High School for Girls 16
- 4 Colchester County High School for Girls 23
- 5 Westcliff High School for Boys 57
- 6 Southend High School for Boys 61
- 7 Southend High School for Girls 76
- 8 Impington Village College 150
- 9 The King’s (The Cathedral) School, Peterborough 180
- 10 Saffron Walden County High School 195

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 The Perse School (26=, national rank)
- 2 The Leys School 67
- 3 Norwich School 122
- 4 Stephen Perse Senior School 124
- 5 Norwich High School for Girls GDST 136
- 6 Ipswich School 156
- 7 St Mary’s School, Cambridge 172
- 8 Chigwell School 189
- 9 New Hall School 190
- 10 Woodbridge School 197

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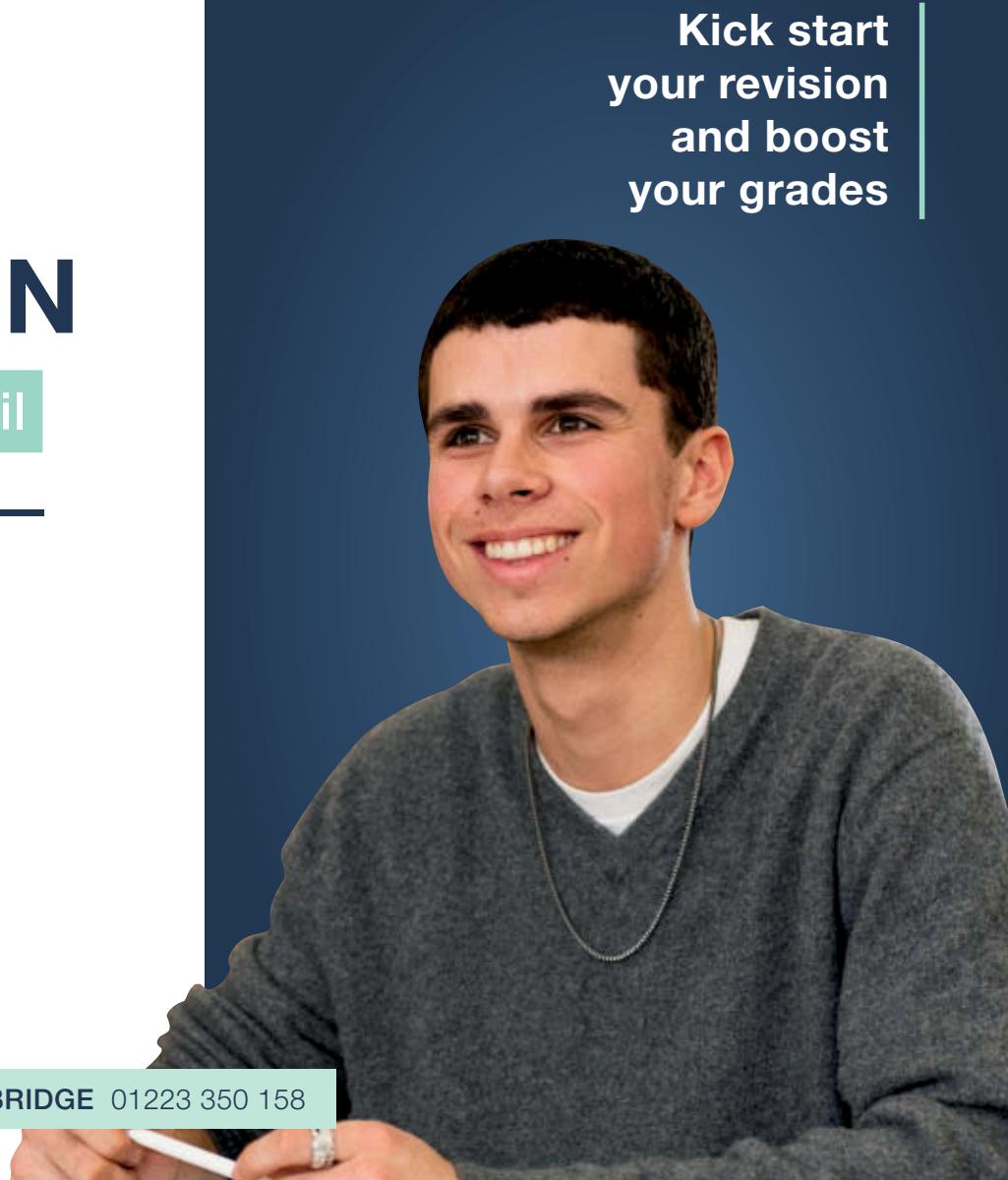
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North

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The number of families attending the open evening for Ripon Grammar School (RGS), a coeducational day and boarding school in the Yorkshire cathedral city, last month was almost double that of a year ago. Why? "Clearly the impact of independent schools [facing VAT on fees], is being felt. All our year groups are full or over our published admissions numbers," Jonathan Webb, the headmaster, says. "A lot of interest is coming from families living in West Yorkshire, Leeds, Bradford and also Sheffield."

Dating from 1555, RGS is one of 40 state boarding schools in the UK, and charges £15,870 a year – so the appeal to the purse is obvious. RGS has also soared up the national Parent Power league table from 146th to 71st and has won **State Secondary School of the Year in the North** and **State Secondary School of the Year in the North for Academic Excellence**. The A-level results were some of the best in the school's history, Webb says: 81.7 per cent of grades were A*-B. "We're a destination of choice – maths and chemistry have been our top-performing subjects at GCSE and A-level." Nine pupils got the grades to go to Oxford and Cambridge.

"The art results are phenomenal as well – 90 per cent were at A*-A last year."

In response to the financial pressures facing the independent sector The College and The Faculty of Queen Ethelburga's near York, which offered more vocational and creative qualifications alongside traditional A-levels, have merged. Queen Ethelburga's College wins **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the North for Academic Excellence**.

Dan Machin, the principal, says that each pupil can tailor a learning programme to their needs, mixing traditional A-levels with other skills. This year, 83 per cent of A-level grades attained A*-A and 90.3 per cent of GCSE grades were 9-7. Esports are available at BTec Level 2 and 3 and pupils have gone to study games design at university.

"We're just really sensible and fun and down to earth and get on with things," Machin adds. "If you want a traditional school that's right in the city centre, that's not us. Parents know what we offer, good education, good care, great innovations."

At Sheffield Girls' School GDST, "I think we are unashamedly academic," says Alex Wilson, appointed head in April. The school is our **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the North**. Accredited as a Google Reference School in 2024, at GCSE, 40 per cent of all grades awarded this year were the top grade (9) and 64 per cent 9-8. Twenty students achieved at least eight grade 9s. "We have really high expectations. We try to give the girls floors to work up from, not glass ceilings," Wilson says.

Tapton School in Sheffield has won **Comprehensive School of the Year in the North**. Two things make the school

Ripon Grammar School pupils on a trip to nearby Fountains Abbey

special, according to Kat Rhodes, its executive director: "We believe in inclusion and we are very focused on outcomes." Among inclusion initiatives, Rhodes singles out the library – run by a library manager with an "encyclopaedic knowledge" of young adult fiction – and the school's reading for pleasure programme, in which sixth-formers mentor and read with younger pupils. **Jayne Dowle**

STUART BOULTON



TOP 10 NORTH

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 Ripon Grammar School (71, national rank)
- 2 Heckmondwike Grammar School 89
- 3 Tapton School 133=
- 4 North Halifax Grammar School 136=
- 5 St Mary's College, Hull 171
- 6 Fulford School 187
- 7 Horsforth School 191
- 8 Archbishop Holgate's School 192
- 9 High Storrs School 215
- 10 Silverdale School 234

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 Queen Ethelburga's College (21, national rank)
- 2 Sheffield Girls' GDST 69
- 3 The Grammar School at Leeds 98
- 4 Bradford Grammar School 125
- 5 Birkdale School 146
- 6 Hymers College 165
- 7 St Peter's School 174=
- 8 Bootham School 203
- 9 Queen Elizabeth Grammar School 205
- 10 Ashville 247

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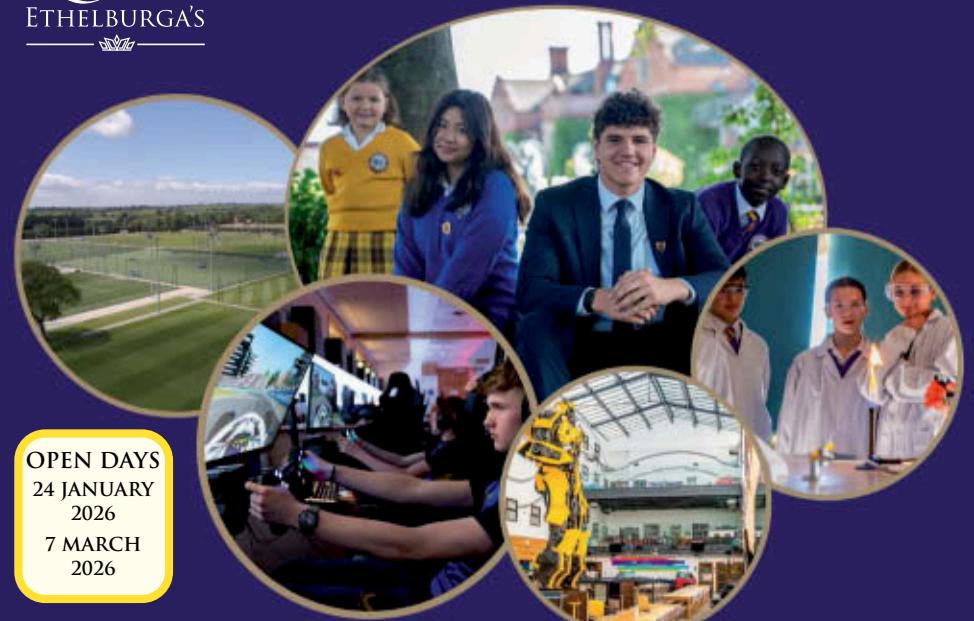


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Parent Power

Northeast

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17

Named after the patron saint of prisoners, St Leonard's RC School has broken the recent winning streak of the high-flying Durham Johnston Comprehensive School by taking the titles of **State Secondary School of the Year in the Northeast**, **State Secondary School of the Year in the Northeast for Academic Excellence**, and **Comprehensive School of the Year in the Northeast**.

The school's exam performance is impressive: at GCSE 46.5 per cent of results were grades 9-7, and 34 per cent of A-levels were A*-As. Its even more impressive when you consider that the school was forced to close in 2023 when reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (Raac) was discovered in its 1960s buildings. Pupils had to study for lessons remotely and in temporary classrooms.

Of its most recent school leavers, seven students went on to study at Oxford and Cambridge, and 70 per cent overall headed for Russell Group universities. Other pupils took on apprenticeships with Rolls-Royce and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Storm force: pupils at Royal Grammar School Newcastle relax with the therapy dog



"We're a Catholic school and Catholic means universal," Chris Hammill, the head teacher, says. "We have 1,300 students of all backgrounds. We sum up our mission in the simple words, 'Each child is known and loved'.

"Students are in small subject classes, their form tutor gets to know them as individuals and they have massively strong relationships with each other."

There are more than 60 clubs which include chess, robotics, and a Taylor Swift society – and it is one of only two state schools in the region to have a rowing club, plus dedicated boat house.

In 2026 new facilities will open in a £71 million rebuild that includes a sports hall, assembly hall, dining room, classrooms, science labs, and art and technology rooms. The original Victorian building has also been refurbished.

It is the curriculum that is expanding at Royal Grammar School Newcastle (RGS Newcastle), which has once again claimed the title of **Independent School of the Year in the Northeast for Academic Excellence**. In response to student demand, A-levels in business studies and photography will be introduced in September 2026.

"[We're] ensuring every student has access to enabling qualifications that support progression to the most competitive university courses," Geoffrey Stanford, the headmaster, says. "We champion a philosophy that exam results should be the consequence – not the purpose –

TOP 7 NORTHEAST

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 St Leonard's RC School, Durham (216, national rank)
- 2 Durham Johnston Comprehensive School 219
- 3 Emmanuel College, Tyne and Wear 239=
- 4 Gosforth Academy 260
- 5 Queen Elizabeth High School, Hexham 261
- 6 Sacred Heart RC High School, Newcastle 265=
- 7 Whitley Bay High School 306=

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 Royal Grammar School, Newcastle (81=, national rank)
- 2 Dame Allan's Girls' School 155
- 3 Yarm School 163=
- 4 Dame Allan's Boys' School 176
- 5 Newcastle High School for Girls GDST 178
- 6 Durham High School 226=
- 7 Durham School 297

loved therapy dog, as they are achieving a string of A*.

In 2025, 80.3 per cent of GCSEs were grades 9-7. At A-level, 86.3 per cent of results were A*-B, and almost 40 per cent of A-level grades achieved by bursary recipients were A*, while pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) collectively outperformed the rest of the cohort, with almost 90 per cent of grades at A*-B.

Rising 34 places in the national independent Parent Power league table to rank 155th, Dame Allan's Girls' School, also in Newcastle, has won **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Northeast**. Founded in 1705 to provide quality education for boys and girls, the primary school and sixth form have been coeducational for more than 40 years, but pupils were taught separately at secondary level. In 2026, however, all classes will be mixed.

"As the world around us changes, we have taken the strategic decision to transition to a one school, coeducational approach," says Will Scott, the principal, whose innovations include an artificial intelligence lead. "Most importantly, our girls consistently break academic gender stereotypes by achieving impressive results across a diverse selection of subjects. They set ambitious goals for themselves as individuals and we are thrilled when they exceed their own expectations."

This year three students secured places at Oxford and Cambridge, collectively earning 12 A* and A grades between them. **Jayne Dowle**

of a well-rounded education." Today its star scholars are as likely to be captaining sports teams, leading the Combined Cadet Force, taking part in robotics club, performing with a music ensemble, or relaxing with Storm, the school's much-



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Northwest

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Five years after opening its doors the first specialist maths school in the northwest, where some students have set up coding companies to earn cash, has taken the national title of **State Sixth Form College of the Year**.

One in six students at the University of Liverpool Maths School (ULMaS), a coeducational specialist maths 16-19 school, achieved straight A*s. Based on the University of Liverpool campus, the sixth form teaches A-levels in maths, further maths, computer science and physics to more than 100 students, some of whom travel up to two hours to attend a 9.30am-4.30pm day.

"It's a perfect environment for mathematically talented sixth-formers to find their tribe and prepare for university and careers in science, technology, engineering or mathematics," says Damian Haigh, the head teacher, who is more likely to be wearing a hoodie than a shirt and tie. Prospective pupils will need to have achieved a grade 8 in maths at GCSE, a 7 in physics or a 777 in combined sciences.

Haigh is keen to stress that although ULMaS students are scientifically inclined, they also enjoy literature and debating, and are putting on a show before Christmas. "We're always trying to take our students to different places, getting them confident in socialising and communicating," Haigh says.

Single-sex education also brings results at Altrincham Grammar School for Girls, winner of **State Secondary School of the Year in the Northwest** and **State Secondary School of the Year in the Northwest for Academic Excellence**.

The girls' grammar with academy status is believed to be the biggest single-sex grammar school in England. It is the only school across all northern regions in the national top 20. Almost all (91 per cent) of all A-level passes were at A*-B, while 40 per cent of GCSE entries achieved the top grade of 9, with 86 per cent of all results graded at 7 or above.

Founded in 1910, the school has educated generations of women who have gone on to lead in their communities and shape the world in which they live, says Stephanie Gill, the head teacher.

The school's motto – *Fortiter, fideliter, feliciter* ("bravely, faithfully and cheerfully") – encourages this confidence and reminds pupils that they can opt to study Latin at GCSE and A-level.

At Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School and Sixth Form College (TIGHS) in Blackburn, Lancashire, named **Comprehensive School of the Year in the Northwest**, almost half (47 per cent) of A-level grades were at A*-A this year,

Up, up and away: Withington Girls' School is an academic powerhouse



and 78 per cent at A*-B. Mufti Hamid Patel, chief executive of the Star Academies network, says: "Year after year the school delivers outstanding outcomes through the dedication of its staff, the ambition of its pupils and the strength of its partnership with parents and the local community."

Star Readers, an innovative whole-school reading programme, includes "Read Aloud", in which groups of pupils read books to each other. The school believes that this helps less fluent or disadvantaged pupils improve their reading ability and underpins their potential for academic success.

Female achievement continues to win awards for Withington Girls' School in Manchester, named **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Northwest for Academic Excellence**, where one in six senior school pupils benefit from a

means-tested bursary. "We are not complacent," Sarah Haslam, the headmistress, says. "People who don't know the school or just look at GCSE and A-level outcomes assume, well, they've got very clever pupils, they're bound to do very well. But it's what happens when the girls come here – that's where the magic is."

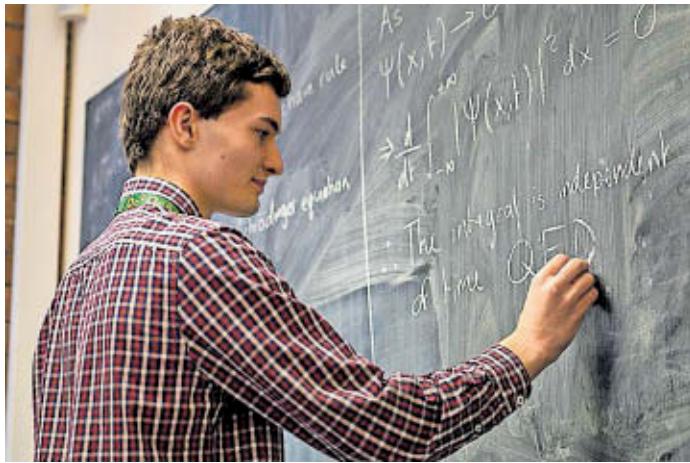
This year almost half of GCSE pupils achieved all subjects at grade 8 or 9 and 82.2 per cent of all grades were grade 8 or 9, while 22 achieved three or more A*s.

But no one wins a prize. When the Fallowfield-based school was founded in 1890, by a group of "far-sighted" Manchester parents who wanted girls to have the same educational opportunities as their brothers, it was decided that academic or other prizes would not be awarded. This, Haslam believes, leads to a spirit of academic collaboration that allows all 756 girls to gain confidence in their own abilities.

The nearby Manchester Grammar School (MGS), whose coat of arms bears three owls, soars 38 places to rank 38th and make the top 40 in the national league table, and is awarded **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Northwest**. Shuttle buses to the city centre railway stations allow pupils from Huddersfield, North Wales and the Peak District to attend.

Last year the school dropped one GCSE, and instead boys do nine subjects and undertake a research project; options might range from investigating new medical research or a particular period of history to developing their research and oracy skills.

University of Liverpool Maths School has found a winning formula



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"It is a little bit unusual," says Martin Boulton, the head master. "Choice is important. So we would allow four languages at GCSE, for example. It's personalised learning, allowing kids who have real skills in languages to pursue this at university."

Co-curriculars escape the confines of the library too.

"My aim is to find a sport for every boy," Boulton says. As well as rugby, football, cricket and hockey there's fencing, plus rock climbing and hill walking every Saturday. "We foster that spirit of adventure."

Jayne Dowle

TOP 10 NORTHWEST

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1 Altrincham Grammar School for Girls (9, national rank)

2 Altrincham Grammar School for Boys 33

3 Sale Grammar School 38

4 The Blue Coat School, Liverpool 43

5 St Ambrose College 51

6 Loreto Grammar School 60

7 Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School and Sixth Form College 72

8 Urmston Grammar 86

9 Lancaster Royal Grammar School 98

10 Cheadle Hulme High School 106

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

1 Withington Girls' School (35, national rank)

2 The Manchester Grammar School 38-

3 The King's School, Chester 79

4 Manchester High School for Girls 91

5 The Grange School 137

6 The Queen's School, Chester 139

7 Windermere School 147

8 The King's School in Macclesfield 157

9 Cheadle Hulme School 183

10 Stockport Grammar School 193

Parent Power

Northern Ireland

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After years of consultation, revolution is coming to classrooms in Northern Ireland with the new TransformED NI strategy through five key reforms: curriculum overhaul for "coherent, knowledge-rich" learning; standardising assessment and qualifications at primary, lower secondary and vocational levels; better professional development for teachers; a revised qualification for school headship; and measures to tackle disadvantage.

The statutory desire to boost performance further comes as three out of ten pupils in Northern Ireland scored top marks this year, achieving A* or A grades in at least one subject. All of Parent Power's top ten schools in Northern Ireland are also ranked in the UK's top 80 state secondaries.

Some schools are already getting it right. Cliodhna Logan, head girl of Rathmore Grammar School, earned four A*s in chemistry, biology, maths and physics to read medicine at Queen's University, Belfast, and the school's results were so impressive that Paul Givan, the education minister in Northern Ireland, paid a visit to offer his congratulations.

Some of the best A-level results in a decade, and GCSEs in which 75.8 per cent of pupils gained seven grades 9-7, has led

to Rathmore climbing 17 places in the UK league table to rank 35th and take the title of **Secondary School of the Year in Northern Ireland**.

Arthur Donnelly, principal of the coeducational Catholic school in Finaghy, Belfast, attributes the success "to the people and the sense of community we have. It's the bedrock of everything."

Nowhere is this spirit more celebrated than when it comes to sport, with extracurriculars including cross-country, boys' and girls' Gaelic football, football and basketball, hurling and camogie.

"Our motto, which we share with our founders, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, an international congregation of religious sisters, is *Ut vitam habent* ('That they may have life')," Donnelly says. "I think that speaks for itself."

The school with the top A-level results in Northern Ireland is Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock, a co-ed Catholic voluntary grammar, but the strength of the A-levels and GCSEs gives Strathearn School the edge to earn it the title of **Secondary School of the Year in Northern Ireland for Academic Excellence**.

Founded in 1929, the school aims to live up to its motto, "Encourage, empower,

Rathmore Grammar School is our Secondary School of the Year in Northern Ireland

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excel", and give every girl confidence and purpose, according to Nicola Connery, the principal.

As well as a strong focus on sport, with Strathearn girls and co-curricular activities ranging from the Engineering Club to Senior and Junior Scripture Union, the school participates in SistersIN, a mentoring programme pairing girls with mentors from business, public life and the community.

Since its launch in 2022, more than 1,200 girls aged 16-18 across 60 schools have taken part in the programme. This year Strathearn's Sophie Murray is paired with Emma Little-Pengally, deputy first minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, while Michelle O'Neill, the first minister, mentors Clodagh Conroy, from St Pius X College, Magherafelt.

Jayne Dowle

TOP 10 NORTHERN IRELAND

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 **Strathearn School** (31, national rank)
- 2 **Rathmore Grammar School** 35
- 3 **St Dominic's Grammar School for Girls** 36
- 4 **Friends' School Lisburn** 46=
- 5 **Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock** 48
- 6 **Lumen Christi College** 53
- 7 **Sullivan Upper School** 61=
- 8 **Banbridge Academy** 64
- 9 **St Louis Grammar School** 65
- 10 **Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School** 69

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Pupils at Douglas Academy in Milngavie hit the high notes musically and academically: last year 91 per cent of pupils left with five or more National 5s, 81 per cent with five or more Highers and 34 per cent with two or more Advanced Highers. As a result the school has risen five places to rank fifth in the academic league table and is named **Scottish Secondary School of the Year**.

"I'm not sure that music makes you more clever," says Mark Evans, course director of the specialist music school that forms part of the East Dunbartonshire comprehensive. "But I think the skills that the students develop are essential to the other aspects of their school life. They have to be organised and disciplined."

Music school pupils follow a bespoke timetable enabling them to juggle specialist instrumental tuition, musical studies and their general education for which they study alongside their peers. Music plays a big role in the wider school too, with pupils developing instrument skills, creating a class band, Live Lounge performances and songwriting.

"It's a school that's focused on the creative element as well as the academic side," says Michael Healy, the head teacher, who took charge in 2024. The school also has a well-established rigorous tracking and monitoring system, lauded by Education Scotland.

Aberdeen Grammar School, one of the oldest schools in the UK, has broken into the top ten for the first time after rising five places to rank eighth, earning the comprehensive our **Runner-up Scottish Secondary School of the Year** award.

The standard-setting Jordanhill School in Glasgow, where typically 85-90 per cent of leavers go on to university, remains as ever the best-performing government-

funded school north of the border, and again wins our **Scottish Secondary School of the Year for Academic Performance** award.

John Anderson, the Jordanhill rector, acknowledges that there are many factors that contribute to a school's success, but says: "There is no escaping from the fact that attaining highly requires a lot of hard work. Participation in sport and the arts is vital for personal development. They build human connections and foster a positive, creative atmosphere in the school that supports learning."

Edinburgh schools dominate our league table, making up half of the top ten of those that follow the Scottish exam system. The leaderboard is headed by St Mary's Music School with George Heriot's School close behind. Heriot's takes the **Scottish Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Performance** award in recognition of the larger numbers achieving top results.

"Academic prowess does not exist in a vacuum," Alastair Anderson, the head of senior school, says. "The achievements of our pupils stem from the integrated nature of classroom teaching, pastoral support and co-curricular opportunity."

Founded in 1628 to educate Edinburgh's "faitherless bairns", Heriot's continues to support children who have lost a parent with means-tested financial assistance up to 100 per cent of fees, and pastoral care. Heriot's has just launched its new five-year academic strategy to enhance the curriculum by focusing on pupil agency, "high order" skills and digital capabilities, including AI.

St Leonards School in St Andrews, an IB school whose results have been converted into A-levels, heads the Scottish fee-paying schools doing A-levels and



GCSEs, becoming our **Scottish Independent Secondary School of the Year for GCSEs and A-levels**.

The combination of high expectations and an abundance of opportunities, including more than 100 extracurricular activities, has also created a recipe for success at The High School of Glasgow, this year's **Scottish Independent Secondary School of the Year**. Founded

Great strides: sports day at The High School of Glasgow

TOP 5 SCOTLAND

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 **Jordanhill School** (1, national rank)
- 2 **Mearns Castle High School** 2
- 3 **Woodfarm High School** 3
- 4 **St Ninian's High School** 4
- 5 **Douglas Academy** 5

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS (HIGHER)

- 1 **St Mary's Music School** (1, national rank)
- 2 **George Heriot's School** 2
- 3 **The High School of Glasgow** 3
- 4 **The Mary Erskine School** 4
- 5 **The Glasgow Academy** 5

INDEPENDENT (IB/A-LEVELS/GCSE)

- 1 **St Leonards School** (142, national rank)
- 2 **Fettes College** 186
- 3 **Merchiston Castle School** 248

as the choir school of Glasgow Cathedral in the 12th century, the oldest school in Scotland is living up to its motto *Sursum Semper*, ever upwards. Pupils raised the bar this summer with their exam results moving from fifth place to third.

A busy calendar of interhouse competitions, the S6 buddy programme, daily whole senior school assemblies and the Saturday rugby and hockey programme create a strong sense of community, belonging and fun.

"This is about high expectations for all pupils and not writing kids off," says Antonia Berry, who became the school's first female rector in August. "It's about understanding that an A is possible for every pupil. Some of them might need a lot more support getting to that place."

Sue Leonard

Wales

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

Cardiff Sixth Form College, a self-described disruptor in the independent sector, is named **Independent School of the Year for A-levels and Independent Secondary School of the Year in Wales for Academic Excellence**. The school – where two thirds of pupils are from southeast Asia – slips three places to rank 40th in the national league table but maintains its No 1 spot in Wales.

Tom Arrand, the principal, is clear there is no secret to a top education. "It is about substance and not style," he says. "Every single hour of every single day is important." His fundamentals? Expert teaching, students who are committed and driven, a focus on wellbeing and character are preconditions for learning. The results speak for themselves: in 2025, 99.6 per cent of grades were A*-B at A-level, and 68.6 per cent were A*.

"There is both a science and an art to teaching," he says. "We've been doing it my way for three years now. We are as awesome as ever academically, but as well as being experts in the classroom we are excelling at developing character."

The ambition is evident in physical form too. The coeducational school is moving to purpose-built premises next to the Millennium Centre in Cardiff Bay in



September 2026 to include a 17-storey boarding complex.

Five schools in Wales are ranked in Parent Power's top 100 independent schools, among them Westbourne School in Penarth, whose stellar exam results – 95.6 per cent of students gained A*-B grades at A-level – led to a 28-place rise year on year and the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year in Wales**.

Marie de Tito Mount, the chief executive of Westbourne International, which also has schools in Sydney, Australia and Singapore, believes the

Cardiff Sixth Form College, where 99.6 per cent of A-level grades were A*-B

global reach has helped to boost the performance of the school, as well as data analysis, AI tutoring, and the harnessing of the latest educational technology and expertise at Cardiff University.

"We can have a teacher writing on a whiteboard in Singapore or Sydney and appearing on a whiteboard in the UK," de Tito Mount says. "It means we can offer increased choice of subjects and make the best use of topic specialist teaching."

The picture of education in Wales in the state sector is more challenging. There are no schools in the top 200 secondary school league table and days after pupils celebrated their A-level and GCSE results this summer Onward, a centre-right think tank, published a report into the state of Welsh learning and concluded that attainment had stagnated so much that average Welsh pupils perform only as well as the most disadvantaged pupils in England. The UK is ranked 14th among OECD countries in the Pisa tables. But if Wales were to be ranked as an individual country, the report said, it would come just above Vietnam in 34th place.

Fighting the good fight and winning **Secondary School of the Year in Wales** and **Secondary School in Wales for Academic Excellence**, Cowbridge School is the only Welsh school in the top 150 ranking at 143= (down from 133= last year).

"It's about making marginal gains and not leaps," says Debra Thomas, the head teacher of the Vale of Glamorgan 3-18

TOP 9 IN WALES

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

- 1 **Cowbridge School** (143=, national rank)
- 2 **Ysgol Bro Preseli** 263=
- 3 **Ysgol Gyfun Penweddig** 310=
- 4 **Ysgol Eirias** 330
- 5 **Y Pant Comprehensive School** 340=
- 6 **Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin** 347=
- 7 **Bishop Vaughan RC School** 379=

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- 1 **Cardiff Sixth Form College** (40, national rank)
- 2 **Westbourne School** 56
- 3 **St Michael's School** 58
- 4 **St John's College, Cardiff** 75
- 5 **The Cathedral School, Llandaff** 88
- 6 **Ruthin School** 166
- 7 **Howell's School, Llandaff** GDST 177
- 8 **Rougemont School** 185
- 9 **Christ College Brecon** 267

school. Pupils excel – 74.5 per cent of grades were A*-B at A-level – despite limited budgets, the challenge of recruiting high-calibre teachers and larger class sizes. She describes the school as "vibrant, creative and solution-focused... We operate change only if it suits us."

Helen Davies

Parent Power

Stem was the future, but it went too far

Employers are still keen on computer and science skills, but a broader approach and focus on creative subjects may be needed to thrive in the workplace

Laura Whitcombe

For the past two decades successive governments have pumped more than a billion pounds into the promotion of science, technology, engineering and maths (Stem) training initiatives – including in schools and universities. The logic for it still seems sound. They wanted to upskill the labour market to power digital and technological transformation. It was certainly pleasing to the tech bros on both sides of the Atlantic who were hungry for developers to forge ahead with building their empires.

In the process, across education settings, computer science classes have shaken off their geeky image and undergone a makeover. Places at extracurricular coding clubs have become hot tickets for middle-class families hoping to set their offspring on a path to employment at Google. As of July 2025, there are more than 2,000 coding clubs meeting in schools and libraries all over the UK, teaching young people how to build their own apps, games, websites and robots, according to the Raspberry Pi Foundation.

Employers are still keen on Stem talent. Michael Kienle, global VP of talent acquisition at L'Oréal, says the company employs “4,000 researchers, 6,000 tech experts and over 20,000 experts in operations”. He says L'Oréal has long focused on recruiting Stem graduates, especially since creating its beauty tech division in 2017. About 40 per cent of the 242,000 registrants for last year's L'Oréal global Brandstorm competition – the world's largest youth innovation contest – were Stem students.

Access to high-quality Stem teaching is often determined by privilege and a postcode lottery. At the fee-paying Kingston Grammar School in southwest London, a state-of-the-art science facility has opened and Stem is flourishing. “We devote a significant proportion of the curriculum to

Stem at all levels,” Stephen Lehec, the headmaster, says. “We have seen an increase in students choosing computer science and design and technology at GCSE ... and increasing numbers choosing further maths at A-level.”

He adds that girls are increasingly viewing Stem careers as attainable thanks to “far more positive role models”, with women in Formula 1 being a prime example. This shift matters. Research by the Institution of Engineering and Technology shows that women make up just 29 per cent of the Stem workforce, with only 16.5 per cent in engineering occupations, and at the present rate of change gender parity will not be reached until 2070.

Meanwhile, Stem provision in less affluent areas is severely constrained. Among schools offering A-levels, almost a third (31 per cent) of those in the poorest communities do not offer computer science A-levels due to a lack of teachers. That's nearly three times the rate in the wealthiest areas (11 per cent), according to the education charity Teach First.

At a time when skills in computing and AI are becoming critical to many top job opportunities, this is unacceptable to James Toop, the chief executive of Teach First. “Successive governments, schools and businesses have rightly prioritised Stem. These subjects open doors to some of the best-paid and fastest-growing careers,” he says. “Yet young people from poorer backgrounds remain much less likely to take the subjects and achieve the top grades – often due to a lack of high-quality Stem teachers – leaving huge reserves of talent untapped.”

Demand for Stem skills is expected to rise. Government projections estimate that more than ten million UK workers could be in Stem jobs by 2030, up from nine million today. But despite a decade of UK government policy focus, the proportion of GCSE and A-level entries in Stem

has stayed flat at about 45 per cent and average grades have barely shifted. And contrary to parental belief, a Stem degree is no guarantee of high earnings. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency,

the median salary 15 months after graduation for Stem students in 2022-23 was £29,498, only modestly above the £27,998 for non-science graduates. Electrical engineering graduates earned £36,115, but biology graduates earned £27,515.

A mismatch between expectation and reality is emerging. As The New York Times highlighted, a US computer science graduate ended up interviewing for a job at the fast-food chain Chipotle because tech opportunities had become so scarce. The story sparked debate about how representative of graduate prospects it was, but it coincided with job cuts at HP, Amazon, Microsoft, Salesforce and Intel, with many linked to automation and AI.

Miriam Peskowitz, the author of *Code Like a Girl*, warns: “Entry-level roles in software engineering, which were once abundant, are now fewer. A lot of kids studying computer science are going to be really disappointed.” But she emphasises that while AI has reshaped entry-level jobs, it hasn't eliminated opportunity. “We wouldn't send a kid into the world without

knowing how to drive a car. I think code will be one of those things we don't want to be blinded by.” Still, she says, “coding alone is not enough for the careers that will survive automation”.

The future, she argues, belongs to those with “analytical and creative capacities, emotional intelligence and the ability to think across disciplines”.

This broader approach is echoed by Professor Julian Chaudhuri, pro-vice-chancellor at the University of Bath, which offers mainly science and business courses and gives most undergraduates the chance to complete a

placement year with employers such as the Bank of England, Deloitte, L'Oréal and GlaxoSmithKline. About two thirds of students take up these opportunities. “Our students want to come here knowing they'll get a good grounding and become competitive in the job market,” he says. Placement students, he says, return from their year in industry with a stronger work ethic too. “They come back and they tell us, ‘We know how to work.’”

Bath's emphasis on real-world learning, he adds, reflects the university's founding purpose: “It's not just about hard maths and equations. It's about putting it into context,” considering it alongside issues such as safety, sustainability and economics.

While Stem has surged in visibility, the arts and humanities have suffered. In November a study by the Courtauld Institute of Art found that history of art is

available as an A-level in only two schools north of Nottingham, highlighting the UK's cultural divide and prompting critics to wonder whether such subjects have been neglected with the view that it is “safer” to stick to Stem, IT or business studies. Global arts funding has fallen

sharply. In the UK, Arts Council funding has dropped 16 per cent in real terms since 2017, including a 30 per cent drop in Wales, 16 per cent in Northern Ireland and 11 per cent in England, according to the performing arts union Equity. Sarah Perry, the author of the novel *The Essex Serpent*, which explores the dynamics of science and superstition, warns that this erosion is concerning.

She is calling on parents to embrace “Steam” rather than just Stem by making sure the arts feature squarely in children's education. This means including creative subjects in GCSE and A-level options or embedding them in extracurricular activity – subjects as diverse as English literature, drama, fine art and photography.

Perry says that “libraries are being closed or being turned into coffee shops or digi hubs” while arguing that this loss of infrastructure is “very, very dangerous” because cultural spaces are what “equip people to think, to learn their politics, to use their vote, to challenge what they're being told”. She says it has “never been more important to give people the ability to distinguish between different modes of writing. That's how people are going to know when they see false information.”

She urges parents not to let their children dismiss the arts, which are valuable areas of study. “Society has come to view education like a slot machine where you put in your money and then you get something out of it that you go and exchange for a house or a car.” Perry calls this view “degrading”, reminding us that “we're human souls – we're not cogs in a capitalist machine”.

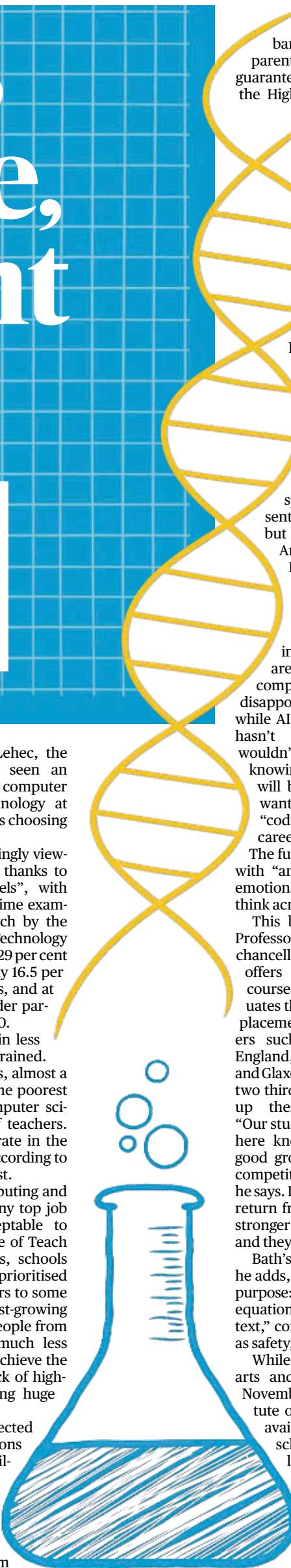
As such, she is calling on parents to recognise that many modern, lucrative industries rely on arts and humanities skills such as “game design, which is a huge industry”. She adds: “An arts and humanities degree equips you with professional skills across the board.” Graduates learn “powers of expression, which is incredibly useful for an industrial chemist or someone running a tech company” as well as the ability to “read information, digest it, set it in context and pick out what you need”.

Mandy Rawlinson is head of UK and EMEA at Aberdeen Investments and has climbed to the top of the male-dominated and Stem-heavy financial services industry with a humanities degree in law. Her business has recruited hundreds of graduates over the past decade and she says the job market is “changing too fast for narrow specialisms. AI is already making competence cheap but creativity priceless.”

Rawlinson sees “technically perfect CVs and completely forgettable personal narratives” instead of “reliability and resilience – even something as simple as returning to the same summer job at McDonald's”. Real-world experience, she insists, “still trumps polish”.

And don't forget about sport, says Rawlinson, who has two young daughters. A study by EY found 94 per cent of C-suite women have played sports. “Being coachable, taking feedback and bouncing back from losses helps young people become well-rounded.”

Above all, she warns parents against producing “robotic” high-achievers with no breadth or spark. “Curiosity, experimentation and interesting experiences will matter far more than perfectionism. And with modern careers rarely following straight lines, children who adapt quickly and question assumptions are going to thrive.”



“
Access to high-quality Stem teaching is often a postcode lottery

“
Real-world experience still trumps polish in the job market

We're at breaking point and still paying for private school

One couple who work for the NHS and the RAF are doing everything they can to give their children an independent education

Liz Rowlinson

Emma* and her husband, Michael*, both aged 45, have a 13-year-old son in year 9 and a ten-year-old daughter in year 6, and are struggling to cover higher school fees. We both grew up on a council estate, so neither of us were privately educated, but we chose independent schools for our two children to give them the best start in life. I'm a mum working in mental health for the NHS and Michael is an engineer who has served 22 years in the RAF. Our two children have been in private education in Essex since the start.

Smaller class sizes and a nurturing environment suited our children perfectly, giving them the stability, individual attention and support they need – something we felt local state schools, often with more than 45 pupils in a class, simply could not provide. Our daughter is the youngest in her year and our son is on the unofficial Send register for processing/focusing.

The wraparound care they provide is also crucial: we both work full-time without relying on childminders or family members, who all work themselves. With long, demanding hours on my side and

Michael working away Monday to Friday and away three months of the year on tour, reliable childcare was essential.

I've always worked full-time and we chose not to live on an RAF base so I could continue my NHS career, but this meant that we don't qualify for the Continuity of Education Allowance (CEA), which covers 90-100 per cent of the cost of school fees for many military families.

Over the past few years school fees have risen so sharply that we're now at breaking point. If we were making the decision today, private school simply wouldn't be possible – or if we had a mortgage to pay (luckily we bought our home 25 years ago and have paid it off).

We live modestly in a three-bedroom semi and drive ordinary cars, with one package holiday a year on a budget to Spain or Greece, with my parents providing a financial contribution.

The introduction of VAT on fees has added about £4,000 a year to our bill – it's now just shy of £47,000 a year for both children, leaving little beyond everyday essentials, especially with steep rises in the costs of groceries and household bills.

We've cut back on anything that could be considered a luxury – or even a small

We're not on the breadline but it is undeniably a struggle



The introduction of VAT on school fees has added pressure on many household budgets

treat. We rarely eat out, never get a takeaway, have cancelled gym memberships and no longer have any therapeutic or beauty treatments. We spend a lot of time together at home or out on walks to save on costs.

We're not on the breadline but it is undeniably a struggle. Everything we earn goes on their education to give them the best possible start.

We don't want to take them out of their school. Local state schools are at breaking point, and the children would find the change of environment very disruptive – they are settled and flourishing where

they are. Moving to Dubai is definitely not an option either.

Our son has two and a half years left and we already know sixth form is out of reach. But the reality is we've started counting down the years just to survive financially. No family should feel forced to wish away their children's lives like that.

The impact of VAT on already rising school fees is pushing ordinary, hard-working families like ours to the edge. And we know we're far from the only ones feeling it. When I look back, sometimes I don't know how we've done it.

*Names have been changed

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