

# Parent power

**The definitive guide to the top secondary schools in the UK**



Parent Power

Welcome to Parent Power 2025

The Sunday Times's definitive guide is here to help you make one of life's most important decisions: which school should you send your child to?

We believe these rankings, and all the additional information on offer in Parent Power, provide guardians with a reliable steer as to academic achievement in schools today.

The educational landscape is challenging – teacher shortages, rising numbers of students with mental health disorders and special educational needs, plus the VAT increase – but there is also much to salute, including the hard work of passionate teachers who are finding innovative and impactful ways to boost pupils' achievements.

As well as celebrating the academic excellence of our top schools, it is fantastic to see how they are shaping their students to be lifelong learners ready for the 21st century.

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# Disneyland for maths

Inside King's Maths School, the in-demand sixth form and destination for 'neeks'.

Stephen Bleach takes a tour

**K**ing's Maths School does not resemble anyone's fantasy seat of learning. It's crammed into two small, utilitarian buildings, wedged between concrete blocks in inner-city Lambeth, south London. But looks aren't everything. This is, the teacher Hannah Holland says, "Disneyland for maths" – and her pupils seem to agree.

King's, named **State Sixth Form College of the Year 2025** and **State Sixth Form College of the Year for Academic Excellence 2025** in the latest edition of Parent Power, teaches only three subjects at A-level: maths, further maths and physics. It has 80 places but receives more than 1,000 applications – which, by our calculation, makes it oversubscribed by 1,250 per cent. It may not be Hogwarts, but those numbers suggest something magical is going on.

As any of the school's budding Turings will tell you, the numbers don't lie. The successful applicants are the brightest and best young mathematicians from the capital and beyond (students commute from as far as Portsmouth and Luton). In part they're drawn by the school's striking results – in 2024, 91 per cent of students scored A\* or A, 33 per cent secured places at Oxford or Cambridge, and the value-added score is an exceptionally high 0.8.

It's more than that, though. In a digital world, maths is arguably the most important subject on the curriculum – but those who excel in it can have a hard

CASSIDY, 17

What I love most about maths is that it is both rigorous and creative

ADAM, 16

I view maths as a sort of art. I hope that I can make a positive impact on the world with my knowledge

time in mainstream education. Laurie, a Year 13 pupil who attended evening GCSE classes here, says that at her old school "it was, 'Oh, why is she talking about maths? Why is she such a nerd?' But here you can kind of embrace it. You're neeky [a cross between nerdy and geeky] and you can be OK with that."

It's a problem Holland is familiar with. "So often those who love maths are marginalised in some way, or don't find their tribe," she says. "But everybody here

has that in common. We share that enthusiasm. We love maths."

They really do. Whiteboards line the walls in the common room and during free periods pupils chat as they cover them with calculations: rapidly scrawled differential equations, integrals and complex numbers meander into every corner. You get the feeling these students have definitely found their tribe.

To the non-mathematicians among us this may sound like pretty dry stuff – but

LAURIE, 17

My maths hero is Ms Haar, my Year 7 and 8 maths teacher. I want her to know how much she inspired me

RYAN KABIR, 18

I love maths. I'm interested in quantitative finance. My hero is Bernhard Riemann

DARIA, 16

I want to be a software engineer. I'm looking forward to learning more about algorithmic thinking

Timothy Bateup, the head teacher, is keen to point out the intriguing applications of the work, such as in the school's innovative projects programme. "One group designed an AI-driven Connect 4 player," he says. "It would play the game with you and a camera would track your facial expressions as you played. Depending on whether you were smiling or frowning, it would adjust the difficulty level. If you were smiling you were probably winning and it would make the

game that bit harder." Another project tackled the maths of successful pitstop strategies in Formula 1 racing; another still created an AI model to predict the movements of financial markets. Sure enough, after university many students embark on careers in banking, asset management and engineering – as well as computing, accountancy and teaching.

The school was founded by King's College London in 2014 "to widen participation in Stem subjects for

underrepresented groups", Holland says. She runs the busy outreach department, which provides summer schools and evening lessons for promising GCSE students from less affluent schools. The college's alumni often return to coach the next generation.

Entrance is open to all, and there is a two-stage selection process: an exam designed to test problem-solving ability rather than previous maths learning, and an interview to gauge suitability and

QUIZ!

Do you remember Pythagoras's theorem? Test your knowledge with the King's Maths School challenge at [thetimes.com/parentpower](https://www.thetimes.com/parentpower)

enthusiasm for the subject. "What we're really trying to assess is long-term potential," Tom Collins, the deputy head teacher, says. "We work hard to attract as many girls as possible to what are traditionally more male subjects" – one of the summer schools is female-only – "and our students come from all over London, with cultures from all over the world. What unites everyone is a love for maths and physics."

Proudly nerdy they may be – the popularity of Dungeons & Dragons and the thriving chess club are additional testimony to that – but King's students are still, the teachers point out, a bunch of teenagers, with all that this entails.

Misbehaviour is rare, partly because of the small size – every teacher knows every pupil by name and can intervene before situations escalate – and partly because of the pupils' motivation. "In my last school people misbehaved because they were bored or just didn't enjoy where they were, but we love it here," Laurie says. "It's just so much better."

Still, when I asked the students when someone last sneaked a surreptitious vape on to school premises, there's an awkward silence. Perhaps that's just as well.

Unlike many other schools, there's no question of banning phones at King's. Technology, including laptops and phones, is integral to the teaching. "Having the phone in lessons can be quite useful," Bateup says. "We have chosen, rather than to ban devices, to focus on helping the students prepare for life and to be able to manage their devices effectively."

While the focus is scientific, the school is keen to provide some cultural context too. The location looks unpromising for sport, but it has arrangements with the nearby London South Bank University to offer a decent range, including basketball, football, tennis, badminton and netball. There are trips to the theatre (plenty of musicals, including *Frozen* and *Guys and Dolls*), museums (the Imperial War Museum is directly over the road) and rather more esoteric outings: a recent talk at King's College London dug deep into the preservation of biological specimens dating to the 1800s.

The success of King's has spawned similar initiatives from other universities, with Exeter, Imperial, Surrey, Cambridge, Leeds, Liverpool and Lancaster launching their own sixth-form maths schools; plans are afoot at Durham, Aston and Nottingham universities too.

If the future will be made by the geeks, this is where the geeks themselves will be made. And if the joyfully "neeky" pupils of King's Maths School are anything to go by, the future is in safe hands.

Inside

4

Meet the winners and the 100 best private and state secondary schools

6

Is private school worth the cost?

8-23

Parent Power: a region-by-region guide to top schools in your area

14

What happened when kids gave up smartphones for three weeks

24

The stress of preparing for the 11-plus

26

Every question you need to ask to choose the right school

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

SCHOOLS GUIDE 2025

TOP 10 INDEPENDENT SECONDARY SCHOOL FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

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# The class of 2025: top secondary schools

**REGIONAL KEY**

- State Secondary School of the Year ●
- State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence ○
- Comprehensive Secondary School of the Year ▲
- Independent Secondary School of the Year ■
- Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence □

**NORTHERN IRELAND**

- Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School ●
- Friends' School, Lisburn ○

**NATIONAL WINNERS**

- 1 Independent Secondary School of the Year Reigate Grammar School
- 2 Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence St Paul's Girls' School
- 3 Independent Secondary Boarding School of the Year; Independent Secondary School of the Year for A-levels Brighton College
- 4 Independent International Baccalaureate School of the Year King's College School, Wimbledon
- 5 Independent Secondary School of the Year for GCSEs Westminster School
- 6 Independent 11-16 Secondary School of the Year Queen Elizabeth's School and Henrietta Barnett School

- 7 State Secondary School of the Year King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls
- 8 State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence Henrietta Barnett School
- 9 Comprehensive School of the Year Impington Village College
- 10 International Baccalaureate State School of the Year Ashcroft Technology Academy, London
- 11 Joint State Secondary School of the Year for A-levels Queen Elizabeth's School and Henrietta Barnett School

- 12 State Secondary School of the Year for GCSEs Henrietta Barnett School
- 13 State 11-16 Secondary School of the Year Sawston Village College
- 14 State Sixth Form College of the Year; State Sixth Form College of the Year for Academic Excellence King's Maths School
- 15 State Faith Secondary School of the Year Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School and Sixth Form College

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- 20 State Faith Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence King's Maths School



## TOP 100 SECONDARY SCHOOLS

S= Selective — PS= Partially selective — C= Comprehensive

2025 rank	Town	Admissions	A-Level (A-B) (%)	GCSE A*/A9/8/7 (%)	2025 rank	Town	Admissions	A-Level (A-B) (%)	GCSE A*/A9/8/7 (%)
1	The Henrietta Barnett School	London	S	95.2 96.9	65	Sullivan Upper School	Holywood	S	74.5 75.1
2	Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet	Barnet	S	95.2 96.6	66	Wolverhampton Girls' High School	Wolverhampton	S	75.5 70.9
3	Wilson's School	Wallington	S	93.6 94.6	67	St Andrew's RC School	Leatherhead	C	85 51.6
4	St Olave's Grammar School	Orpington	S	93.4 95.1	68	Stroud High School	Stroud	S	73.8 73.5
5	Pate's Grammar School	Cheltenham	S	92.3 91.9	69	Westcliff High School for Girls	Westcliff-on-Sea	S	74.3 71.8
6	The Tiffin Girls' School	Kingston upon Thames	S	90.7 94.1	70	Aylesbury Grammar School	Aylesbury	S	75.8 67.8
7	Colchester Royal Grammar School	Colchester	S	92.2 93.2	71	Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School	Sidcup	S	72.8 73.4
8	Altrincham Grammar School for Girls	Altrincham	S	89 90.4	72	Dartford Grammar School for Girls	Dartford	S	73 72.3
9	King Edward VI Grammar School	Chelmsford	S	89.1 89.7	73	St Paul's School for Girls, Edgbaston	Birmingham	C	82.3 53.3
10	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls	Stratford-upon-Avon	S	89.8 88	74	King Edward VI Handsworth School	Birmingham	S	71 75.9
11	King Edward VI School, Stratford	Stratford-upon-Avon	S	90.1 86.3	75	West London Free School	London	PS	83 51
12	Reading School	Reading	S	90 85.7	76	Denmark Road High School	Gloucester	S	69.5 77.5
13	Tiffin School	Kingston upon Thames	S	92.6 78.1	77	Townley Grammar School	Bexleyheath	S	71.9 72
14	Dartford Grammar School	Dartford	S	91.9 77.9	78	Ballymena Academy	Ballymena	S	76.8 62
15	Tonbridge Grammar School	Tonbridge	S	90 81.7	79	Impington Village College	Impington	C	74.4 66.9
16	St Michael's RC Grammar School, Finchley	London	S	88.2 84.1	80	Heckmondwike Grammar School	Heckmondwike	S	68.5 78.4
17	The Latymer School	London	S	86.6 86	81	JFS	Harrow	C	83.6 47.8
18	Stratford Girls' Grammar School	Stratford-upon-Avon	S	86.7 85.7	82	Lancaster Girls' Grammar School	Lancaster	S	73.9 66.8
19	Colyton Grammar School	Colyton	S	86.2 85.3	83	Wycombe High School	High Wycombe	S	71 72
20	Chelmsford County High School for Girls	Chelmsford	S	84.5 85.3	84	Devonport High School for Girls	Plymouth	S	71.3 71.1
21	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys	Birmingham	S	82.9 87.4	85	Bishop Wordsworth's School	Salisbury	S	74.9 63.4
22	Newstead Wood School	Orpington	S	84.6 83.7	86	Alcester Grammar School	Alcester	S	73 67
23	Loreto Grammar School	Altrincham	S	87.4 76.5	87	Bournemouth School for Girls	Bournemouth	S	74.5 64
24	Altrincham Grammar School for Boys	Altrincham	S	84.8 81.5	88	Camden School for Girls	London	PS	79.1 54.6
25	The Judd School	London	S	83.2 82.2	89	Aylesbury High School	Aylesbury	S	70 72.6
26	Dame Alice Owen's School	Potters Bar	PS	87 74.3	90	John Hampden Grammar School	High Wycombe	S	72.9 66.5
27	Wallington County Grammar School	Wallington	S	86.9 73.7	91	St Ambrose College	Altrincham	S	72 68.1
28	Kendrick School	Reading	S	79 89.3	92	The King's School, Grantham	Grantham	S	78.1 55.8
29					93	Parmer's School	Watford	PS	76.2 59.3
30					94	XCross (Jewish Community Secondary School)	Barnet	C	80.5 50.4
31					95	Haberdashers' Adams	Newport	S	75 61
32					96	South Wilts Grammar School	Salisbury	S	69.2 72
33					97	Belfast Royal Academy	Belfast	S	75.8 57.8
34					98	Colchester County High School for Girls	Colchester	S	61.6 86.2
35					99	Torquay Girls' Grammar School	Torquay	S	75 58.7
36					100	Sir Joseph Williamson's Math. School	Rochester	S	76.6 55.3

## Methodology

Parent Power ranks 400 of the best state secondary and grammar schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the top 100 state schools in Scotland, 30 11-16 schools and 50 sixth form colleges. It also ranks the top 330 independent schools in the UK and 17 under Scotland's Highers and Standards system, and 40 IB schools.

Schools are ranked by performance at A-level and GCSE in summer 2024. 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 (A\* and A grades) gained at GCSE is expressed as a percentage of the total number of GCSE entries overall. We include IGCSEs sat in private schools. This is single-weighted. School rankings are based on their combined performance in these examinations.

If a school does not appear it is most likely because it did not respond to our requests for its A-level and GCSE results, and the results could not be found in the public domain.

weighted. School rankings are based on their combined performance in these examinations. If a school does not appear it is most likely because it did not respond to our requests for its A-level and GCSE results, and the results could not be found in the public domain.

## TOP 100 INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

2025 rank	Town	Admissions	A-Level (A-B) (%)	GCSE A*/A9/8/7 (%)	2025 rank	Town	Admissions	A-Level (A-B) (%)	GCSE A*/A9/8/7 (%)
1	St Paul's Girls' School	London	98.2 98.5	94.4 89.5	66	Surbiton High School	Kingston upon Thames	85.1 91.3	86.9 86.8
2	St Paul's School	London	98 97.5	93.3 91.4	67	Oxford High School GDST	Oxford	86.9 88.8	88 82.8
3	Brighton College	Brighton	99.3 94.7	94.2 89.1	68	Epsom College	Epsom	88 82.8	87.5 83.3
3	King's College School, Wimbledon	London	97.4 98.6	94.5 88.3	69	Wellington College	Crowthorne	87.5 83.3	
5	Westminster School	London	96.8 98.7	94.5 88.3	69	Nottingham High School	Nottingham	85.7 86.8	
6	Godolphin and Latymer	London	96.4 97.8	91.9 93	70	Hurstpierpoint College	Burgess Hill	89 79	
7	North London Collegiate School	Edgware	96.9 96.3	96.9 81.8	71	St John's School	Leatherhead	88.6 79.8	
8	Guildford High School	Guildford	95.8 98.2	91.7 91.6	71	St Mary's Calne	Calne	87.6 81.8	
9	City of London School for Girls	London	96.6 95.2	94.6 84.1	74	Queen's College, London	London	92.1 72.1	
10	King Edward VI High School for Girls	Birmingham	95.7 95.4	90.4 92.1	75	St Catherine's, Bramley	Guildford	85.8 84.1	
11	Lady Eleanor Holles School	Hampton	94.9 96.8	92.9 86.1	76	The Manchester Grammar School	Manchester	85.1 85.1	
12	Wycombe Abbey	High Wycombe	94.7 97	93 85.7	77	Headington Rye Oxford	Oxford	87.2 79.8	
13	Highgate School	London	95.8 94.8	92 87	78	St Dunstan's College	London	88 77.7	
14	Reigate Grammar School	Reigate	96.8 90	91.2 86.9	79	Colfe's School	London	86.8 79.2	
15	Hampton School	Hampton	93.8 95.8	91.9 85.8	80	Burgess Hill Girls	Burgess Hill	92.6 67.5	
16	Latymer Upper School	London	94.4 94.3	90 89.7	81	Birkenhead School	Oxton	84.2 84	
17	South Hampstead High School GDST	London	94.2 93.2	90 89.7	82	Churher's College	Petersfield	88.3 74.4	
18	Haberdashers' Girls' School	Elstree	96 89.5	91.7 85.7	83	Manchester High School for Girls	Manchester	85.8 78.8	
19	Magdalen College School	Oxford	94.9 91.5	92.7 83.3	84	Westbourne School	Penarth	89.5 71.1	
20	Putney High School GDST	London	93.9 92.7	91.3 85.9	85	Oundle School	Peterborough	87.6 74.2	
21	City of London School	London	94.6 91.2	91.7 85.9	86	Radley College	Haywards Heath	88.2 71.9	
21	Queen Ethelburga's College	York	96.7 86.9	91.7 85.9	87	King Edward's School, Bath	Bath	81.7 84.1	
23	Notting Hill and Ealing High School GDST	London	94.7 90.7	91.6 85.8	88	St Helen's School, Northwood	Northwood	82.8 81.5	
24	Eton College	Windsor	93.6 92.7	91.1 85.8	88	Walthamstow Hall Senior School	Sevenoaks	86.4 74.4	
25	University College Senior School	London	93.3 92.9	91.2 85.8	90	Reed's School	Cobham	86 75	
25	Withington Girls' School	Manchester	92.9 93.6	90.9 85.6	90	Leicester Grammar School	Leicester	83.2 80.6	
27	Alleyn's School	London	95.5 88	89 87.3	92	The Leys	Cambridge	87.6 71.4	
28	Wimbledon High School GDST	London	92 94.6	89.6 86.4	93	Harrodian	London	85.6 75.3	
29	Sevenoaks School	Sevenoaks	96.1 86.4	86.3 91.7	94	Chigwell School	Chigwell	84 77.8	
30	The Haberdashers' Boys' School	Elstree	93 92.3	92.4 79.9	95	Roedean School	Brighton	83.4 78.9	
31					96	Croydon High School GDST	South Croydon	83.3 78.7	
32					97	The Yehudi Menuhin School	Cobham	88.5 66.3	
33					98	Blackheath High School GDST	London	83 77	
34					99	The Maynard School	Exeter	86.3 70	
35					100	Forest School	London	82.4 77.6	

## Top 1,000 primary schools

To see the full list of primaries in England, how one family moved 500m to secure a place at an outstanding London school, and the children's laureate Frank Cottrell-Boyce's choice of books to read from Reception to Year 6, go to [thetimes.com/parentpower](https://www.thetimes.com/parentpower)

# Parent Power

**B**y the time Sonal Sachdev Patel's teenagers leave school, the family will have spent the best part of half a million pounds on private school fees. It is a huge outlay for any household. The most recent calculations by the Independent Schools Council estimate that independent school day fees average £18,000 a year, while families have to find about £36,000 a year for boarding.

And it is about to get worse: the axing of the VAT exemption for private schools, higher employer's national insurance contributions and the removal of business rates relief for schools will pile on the financial pressure.

So is a private education worth it? Sachdev Patel's daughters attend North London Collegiate School (NLCS), a top-performing girls' day school in Edgware. It ranks seventh in the national Parent Power league table.

"I know the value of it because I've experienced it," Sachdev Patel, 44, says. "But some schools are really good at marketing and other schools are less good at marketing; it's very hard to tell from the outside what it is you are paying for."

Without an inside track, and with fees set to rise, hard-pressed families are increasingly looking for evidence that independent schools offer good value.

"In the past you wouldn't choose a school just because it was cheaper, you would go for what you felt was right for your family," Harry Cobb, a director at the education consultants Bonas MacFarlane, says. "But we have had calls from people looking outside of boarding now because they feel there is more value in day schools, despite having to pay for childcare or other costs."

The government's assault on the sector comes at a time when some of the advantages traditionally enjoyed by the privately educated appear to be waning. In core GCSE subjects such as maths and English, state-educated teenagers now do just as well as their private school peers, once socioeconomic status is accounted for, according to research from University College London.

In university admissions, too, private school applicants risk being relegated as elite institutions prioritise pupils from low-performing schools, less affluent families and pupils from areas of high deprivation. At the same time, leading employers are downgrading the importance of exam results when hiring.

Against this background, independent schools are having to work even harder to prove their worth and understand what parents want and expect.

That wish list is a complex mix of intangibles such as "a nice atmosphere", "friendliness" and "good pastoral care", along with the more quantifiable benefits of small classes (often fewer than ten pupils), high-quality teachers and extensive extracurricular programmes.

Current and potential parents at Sherborne Girls, a boarding school in Dorset, mentioned all of these aspects in a recent survey. Academic success was not in the top ten must-haves, although 100 per cent of parents valued it.

"We get brilliant results, so I think there is an assumption that this is a given," says Dr Ruth Sullivan, the head teacher. "We stretch and challenge, but we add value to students of all abilities and our pastoral care is outstanding. We are absolutely not an academic hothouse and parents wouldn't choose us for that; they know there are other schools."

Bespoke curriculums can accommodate novel combinations of subjects. Sport is taken seriously, but so are creativity, personal skills, academic enrichment and service. Pupils are expected to take part in multiple



HESTER MARRIOTT

## Is spending £100,000 on school worth it?

Possibly. But as the VAT hike pushes fees up, parents are demanding value for money. *Julie Henry reports*

"co-curricular activities" from an exhaustive list from coding to crochet.

Imogen, a sixth-former who plans to follow her father into the armed forces, is keen on the Combined Cadet Force. Her classmate Kate, a tennis player, was drawn to the lush grass courts when she first looked round the school: "There is so much space here," she says.

Extensive sports pitches, practice nets, gyms and swimming pools are standard across the sector. Some schools even

boast an equestrian centre, golf course, zoo or farm.

While great facilities might be attractive to families, some parts of the sector have been criticised in recent years for hiking up fees to pay for lavish art, science and technology labs, design studios, IT suites, recording studios, "wellbeing centres" and theatres that rival the West End.

Going private, for some parents, is driven by a more fundamental consideration: avoiding the state school

**Wellington College, Berkshire, offers 150 co-curricular activities**

round the corner. Research shows that those living closer to grammar or state schools with an "outstanding" Ofsted rating are less likely to go private. But if the local state school is failing or cannot cater for their child's special educational needs, parents will move mountains.

"When my daughter's state primary introduced 'free-flowing' classes at reception and she hadn't had any phonics teaching by the time she was six years old, we knew we had to get her out," one parent who went private reveals.

However, families on the doorstep of challenging schools are the least likely to be able to afford the looming fee rises across the independent sector.

Colfe's School, a co-ed in southeast London, fears it will make the independent sector more exclusive.

"Colfe's is not a wealthy school," Richard Russell, the headmaster, says. "Positioned as we are emphatically at the non-snooty end of the independent sector, we will have to work harder to maintain our inclusive ethos."

For some families, though, being "posh" or mixing with the "right" kind of people is the point, although that is rarely admitted to. The desire for a more exclusive peer group, and the aspiration-building this engenders, might not show up in standard surveys but in-depth interviewing reveals these are significant motivators for parents.

Access to privileged networks – and elite universities – is a lure. Independent school entry figures for Russell Group universities, Oxbridge, medicine courses and, increasingly, the American Ivy League are pored over by parents – and on these measures they can rest assured.

Although the best universities are keen to widen access, they are still private-school heavy. However, places on the best degree courses are not the only way to tell if investment in private school fees is paying off: parents are increasingly expecting schools to help their children discover – and pursue – life ambitions.

Careers education has undergone a transformation in recent years, with more work-related programmes, internships and input from big-name employers.

"Schools are doing a lot more alumni work," Cobb says. "My old school has copious network events and is adding value by harnessing alumni connections."

High-status professions – law, medicine, finance and the top reaches of civil service – are still dominated by the privately educated and this looks set to continue. Pupils at private schools are also more likely to secure high-level apprenticeships offered by global tech firms and management consultants.

Private school alumni are excelling in the creative industries too. Research published last month shows that top-selling musicians are six times more likely to have attended private schools, while Bafta-nominated actors are five times more likely to have done so. Privately educated students make up more than half the intake at the most conservatoires.

Vicky Bingham, the headmistress at NLCS, thinks that as well as first-class teachers who know their pupils, parents are looking for the "magic, catalytic opportunities that can transform a child's experience of school".

The word "confidence" comes up time and again when parents talk about what they want for their children. It also comes up when students are asked what they would like more of. In a recent survey of Gen Zs by the schools group Nord Anglia Education, it topped the list of the most important attributes for a happy life.

Sachdev Patel says. "I would rather have lower grades but a confident, well-rounded child than the other way around, because you can't put a value on that."

# How to win a scholarship to a top private school

**S**imon Reid is one of the most generous teachers in the land. As head of Christ's Hospital, where boarding fees start at £13,970 a term, he has approved about 700 fully funded places since his appointment in 2017.

It tops a list of 200 independent schools for its bursary and scholarship provision, in an analysis by The Sunday Times. To give an understanding of which schools offer the most aid, we divided how much financial assistance each institution provided in 2022-23 – a year after Sir Keir Starmer had publicly committed to charging VAT on fees – by the number of students enrolled that year.

Christ's Hospital awarded on average £25,900 a student – almost twice as much as the school in second place, Moreton Hall, an all-girls school in Shropshire, where funding increased faster than at any of the other institutions during that year.

The analysis also found that:

- Clifton College, Downside School, Eton College, Repton School and Winchester College made the top ten of schools according to per-pupil spend on bursaries and scholarships, each averaging more than £5,600.
- Rugby School, Charterhouse, Marlborough College, Harrow School, Latymer Upper School and Dulwich College were among 15 schools that increased their spend by £500,000-plus.



ALAN WRIGHT

- Forty of the 200 schools cut their bursary and scholarship funding during 2022-23, including Churcher's College in Hampshire and Ampleforth College in North Yorkshire.

Christ's Hospital's largesse is only possible because of a £400 million-plus foundation created when the school was founded in 1552. Few schools have access

**Abigail, the second monitor of Christ's Hospital, credits the school with changing her life**

to such resources; instead they fund financial assistance from fee income. With independent schools now facing significant cost rises – a triple-whammy of VAT on fees, higher employer's national insurance payments and the axing of business rates relief – many are warning that more will resort to cutting the financial support on offer to those from poorer backgrounds.

Elaine Cunningham-Walker, a consultant who has helped nearly 450 young people to find places at independent schools, urges parents not to be discouraged. Her approach starts with a Swot analysis of a child. An acronym from the management consultancy world, Swot stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

If your child has a flair for music, sport or art and drama, it makes sense to prioritise institutions with a track record of recognising such talent with financial support. If your son or daughter's strengths are academic, your focus may be best directed to different institutions.

"You've got to do that research – get a spreadsheet going," Cunningham-Walker says. "When it comes to applications, don't be afraid appeal to the school's ego, and say what a difference life there will make to your child."

Cunningham-Walker dismisses the notion that only parents who are very hard-up should apply for bursaries. She

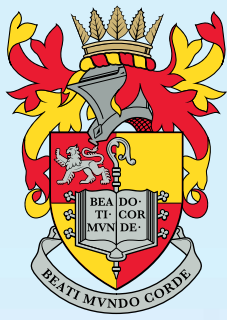
sees cases of families with earnings of more than £100,000 receiving such help. Christ's Hospital's marketing material includes an example of a pupil from a household with a post-tax income of £90,000 receiving a 40 per cent bursary. Earnings of more than £150,000 a year are still within the scope for some London day schools to offer financial assistance.

After looking at a spectrum of schools, parents should focus on a handful where they have time to attend an open day with their child. Schools expect applicants to sit tests and, if they are to board, attend a taster weekend with an overnight stay.

For those who secure a funded place at a private school, the effects can be lasting and life-changing. Back at Christ's Hospital in the wood-panelled dining room, 18-year-old Abigail is thinking about her future. Her parents split up when she was four and she admits to a bit of "bunking off" during her primary school days when she was growing up in Wembley, northwest London.

Abigail is now setting her own example to others. She is the school's second monitor (effectively head girl) and has an economics degree in her sights. When I ask what advice this thoughtful young woman would give to parents applying for bursaries and scholarships, she says: "What have you got to lose? You've got to try."

**Robert Watts**



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# Parent Power

## Greater London

London dominates as an educational powerhouse. Top of the class is the £31,593-a-year (excluding VAT) St Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, west London, where the daughters of KCs, doctors and bankers compete to gain admission. It wins the **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence 2025** award.

The high mistress, Sarah Fletcher, who will retire in the summer, has set up a wellbeing centre, a five-day-a-week counselling service and dozens of clubs and sports to keep the girls happy and healthy. The school has also launched courses in computer science and creative technology, and all students learn to code.

In common with many other schools rising up the Parent Power league tables and taking awards in the capital, Henrietta Barnett School (HBS), in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where about 20 pupils compete for each place through the 11-plus exam, is championing the connection between academic success and emotional and social development. It wins four honours, including **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in London 2025**.

Emma MacLeod, the head teacher, is not surprised by the dominance of single-sex schools at the top of the rankings. "I would say single-sex education allows students to occupy a full range of roles without feeling they need to conform to certain types; it allows schools to cater for the cognitive needs and preferences of girls [and boys]," she says. It is a pattern repeated across the state

sector. HBS and the boys' grammar Queen Elizabeth's School in Barnet topped the league table, sharing the title of **State Secondary School of the Year for A-levels 2025**.

The selective girls' school Newstead Wood School in Orpington, southeast London, wins the title of **State Secondary School of the Year in London 2025**. "The culture in a girls' school is about smashing the glass ceiling and removing stereotypes," Alan Blount, the head teacher, says. "All heads in the Stem subjects are strong, powerful, diverse women. A can-do attitude helps foster the confidence to do well."

At the West London Free School, which has jumped 41 places in the national league table to 75, the joint head teachers, Ben McLaughlin and Robert Peal, point out that the GCSE and A-level results are even more remarkable when you consider that the grade boundaries this summer were set at 2019 levels, yet the pupils were still living with the fallout from Covid. It wins **Comprehensive Secondary School of the Year in London 2025**.

They see the stellar outcomes as "vindication" of the overall ethos of the school. "We had to make sure that pupils felt cared for and listened to, to codify expectations and offer attention and a sense of belonging," Peal says.

That's not to say they take a relaxed approach. "We are strict," Peal says. "There is a silent transition between lessons. This helps everyone, especially those who are shy or who often go unnoticed. And, of course, any phone spotted by a teacher is confiscated."

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**Rock on: Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet is the joint Independent Secondary School of the Year for A-levels**



ELEANOR BENTALL

## TOP 10

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1	The Henrietta Barnett School (1)
2	Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet
3	Wilson's School
4	St Olave's Grammar School
5	The Tiffin Girls' School
6	Tiffin School
7	St Michael's RC Grammar School, Finchley
8	The Latymer School
9	Newstead Wood School
10	Wallington County Grammar School

Taking a holistic approach, they agree that music is the "lifeblood of the school" – 9 per cent of admissions are selective based on musical ability – and any school where hundreds of pupils have music lessons every week, including for bassoon and tuba, deserves the spotlight.

Enrichment activities at Westminster School played a significant role in its pupils achieving GCSE results that were 98.7 per cent grades 9-7. It wins **Independent Secondary School of the Year for GCSEs 2025**.

Dr Gary Savage, headmaster of the boys' school, which will be fully coeducational by 2028, believes this is only a starting point. "Variety means

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

1	St Paul's Girls' School (1)
2	St Paul's School
3	King's College School, Wimbledon
4	Westminster School
5	Godolphin and Latymer
6	North London Collegiate School
7	City of London School for Girls
8	Lady Eleanor Holles
9	Highgate School
10	Hampton School

choice, and choice often translates into success," he says.

Returning to the No 1 spot is Palmers Green High School in north London, which is named **Independent 11-16 Secondary School of the Year 2025**.

For the first time the Ashcroft Technology Academy in Putney, southwest London, is crowned **International Baccalaureate State Secondary School of the Year 2025**, with an average result of 38 points. Its academic success can be attributed to key developments over the past two years, the head teacher, Douglas Mitchell, says. One is the introduction of a live tracking system with an extensive database of

### COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

1	West London Free School (75)	National rank
2	JFS	81
3	Camden School for Girls	88
4	JCoss (Jewish Community Secondary School)	94
5	The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School	101
6	Hasmonean High School for Girls	108
7	Twyford CofE High School	110
8	Mossbourne Community Academy	115
9	Lady Margaret School	119
10	The St Marylebone CofE School	126

university offer rates and typical grade requirements to provide personalised careers guidance. Another is investing in the professional development of teachers. It strives to create a welcoming atmosphere – and has an attendance rate of more than 98 per cent.

Preparing for high-flying futures is the name of the game at King's Maths School, which is named the overall **Sixth Form College of the Year 2025** as well as **Sixth Form College of the Year for Academic Excellence 2025**, and King's College School, Wimbledon, which takes the title of **Independent International Baccalaureate School of the Year 2025**.  
Sian Griffiths and Helen Davies

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Parent Power

Southeast



The schools in the southeast are back to their winning ways. The region is home to four of the top 20 in our combined academic rankings for state and independent schools, and a third of institutions in the top 100. Reigate Grammar School (RGS) in Surrey is Parent

Power's national **Independent Secondary School of the Year 2025**. "Happy children do great things is the unofficial motto of our school," says Shaun Fenton, the headmaster of RGS, which also scoops the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Southeast 2025**. Stellar

results have led to a 12-place rise in the independent league table, which means RGS has broken into the national top 20. The school, where fees start at £28,440 a year including VAT, turns its playground into a fairground every summer with dodgems and candyfloss stalls before students begin their GCSE and A-level

**Brighton College instils an ambitious global outlook in its boarders and day pupils**

study leave. Every pupil at the 1,100-strong coeducational school studies five languages and about 150 receive some means-tested support. Alumni include Sir Keir Starmer, the prime minister, who joined the school after passing the 11-plus before it turned private two years later.

Fenton tells pupils to "be yourself". "We are looking for peacemakers not troublemakers," he says. "Are they going to give up when stuck or ask the teacher for help? That 'urge to be curious' leads to excellent results, but also resilient young people equipped to succeed once they leave school."

Brighton College rose eight places to return to the national top ten and took triple honours: the overall **Independent Secondary Boarding School of the Year 2025**, **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Southeast 2025**, and the overall **Independent Secondary School of the Year for A-levels 2025**.

Richard Cairns, the longstanding headmaster, puts this down, in part, to a "relentless focus on recruiting and retaining the most inspirational teachers in the country".

It matches Brighton College's ambitious and global outlook. Cambridge may be the most common destination for leavers, but increasing numbers of pupils are applying to US universities: a recent head boy turned down Cambridge to go to Harvard, while a pupil this year turned down Yale to go to Oxford.

It is a similarly international perspective at Dartford Grammar School, one of the first schools to teach the



**'Happy children do great things' is Reigate Grammar's unofficial motto**

International Baccalaureate. The school is one of the most oversubscribed schools in one of the most competitive local education authorities. There are 68 first languages spoken in the school and pupils have to study either Chinese Mandarin or Japanese as well as a second European language to GCSE. It rises five places to 14 in the national state league table and takes the title of **State Secondary School of the Year in the Southeast 2025**.

This summer Dartford Grammar reported the strongest set of GCSE results in its history. This is a reflection, according to Julian Metcalf, the head teacher, of outstanding teachers, passion and commitment. If you want evidence of

TOP 10

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

Regional rank	National rank
1 Dame Alice Owen's School (26)	
2= St Andrew's RC School	67
2= Parmiter's School	93
4 Sandringham School	105
5 St Clement Danes School	117
6 Watford Grammar School for Boys	123
7 St Peter's RC School, Guildford	125
8 St George's School	136
9 Gordon's School, Woking	141=
10 Rosebery School	150=

this, just look at the titles of some of the extended essays chosen by the 600-strong sixth form. They include *How does the Elitist Genetic Algorithm compare to Ant Colony System in terms of time complexity and accuracy when attempting to solve the Travelling Salesman Problem?*

The buzzword at Reading School, which is named **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Southeast 2025**, is "curiosity".

"Our best students need to move beyond the syllabus," the Rev Dr Chris Evans, the headmaster, says. "The [Michael] Govian idea that to do really well is to be spoon-fed is an artificial idea of learning." One of the initiatives Evans

has launched is the half-term October reading week, when disadvantaged students get a free book of their choice. Since its inception there has been an increase in non-fiction borrowing. The most borrowed book is *What If? Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions* by Randall Munroe.

"The emphasis is less on the academic and more on the attitude," Evans says. "We encourage music and sports to build team skills. These softer skills, like civic duty, that might have been implicit a generation ago now need to be taught explicitly."

Rules brought in at Dame Alice Owen's School, in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, last year on smartphones stipulate that if they are seen they are confiscated.

"When we brought that in I expected a backlash," Hannah Nemko, the head teacher of the partially selective coeducational school, says. "We have not had a peep of protest. It is cool to be clever here."

Perhaps the ban helped to boost results, which have led to the school rising from 65 to 26 in the national rankings. It scoops the **Joint Comprehensive School of the Year in the Southeast 2025** with St Andrew's Catholic School, Leatherhead.

Alan Mitchell, the head teacher, says: "In essence we build excellent relationships with students and parents, we work incredibly hard, instil belief and confidence into every child, never make excuses and we are always trying to do things a little better each day."

Sian Griffiths and Helen Davies

TOP 10

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Regional rank	National rank
1 Reading School (12)	
2= Dartford Grammar School	14=
2= Tonbridge Grammar School	14=
4 The Judd School	25
5 Dame Alice Owen's School	26
6 Kendrick School	28
7 Chesham Grammar School	29
8 Langley Grammar School	31
9 Dr Challoner's Grammar School	33
10 Dr Challoner's High School	38=

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

1 Brighton College (3=)

Regional rank	National rank
2 Guildford High School	8
3 Wycombe Abbey	12
4 Reigate Grammar School	14
5 Haberdashers' Girls' School	18
6 Magdalen College School	19
7 Eton College	24
8 Sevenoaks School	29
9= The Haberdashers' Boys' School	30=
9= Tonbridge School	30=

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# Parent Power

## East Midlands

There was a rumour this year that the Prince and Princess of Wales were considering sending Prince George to Oundle School in Northamptonshire. A royal seal of approval (in addition to the royal charter it was granted in 1930) would further burnish the credentials of this august public school founded in 1556. It recorded the top A-level results of all private schools in the region in 2024, and it has been awarded the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the East Midlands 2025**.

The coeducational school, which charges boarding fees of £11,718 to £19,266 a term, has risen seven places in the national table to 85. "Ten per cent of our leavers regularly go on to Oxford and Cambridge, and at any one time we have several sixth-form pupils in receipt of a prestigious Arkwright Engineering Scholarship, as well as pupils involved in national youth music groups, to mention just a few of their achievements," Sarah Kerr-Dineen, Oundle's head teacher, says. "Our pupils always know they are part of something bigger than their everyday lives and look up and out to what lies beyond."

Purpose and pastoral care are also at the heart of Nottingham High School, where about a tenth of senior school pupils receive some form of financial assistance. It recently opened a purpose-built wellbeing centre with physiotherapy sessions, a counselling service and relaxing chillout and spirituality spaces. "Happy children achieve a great deal

more, so we have invested in a real focus on student wellbeing as a way of underpinning academic success," says Kevin Fear, the head teacher, who will retire in September.

The strategy appears to be working: Nottingham High School is the only other private school in the East Midlands to move up the national independent rankings this year, by seven places to 69. It tops the regional table with consistent exam performance at GCSE and A-level and is awarded the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the East Midlands 2025**.

In the state sector the selective coeducational Caistor Grammar, in Lincolnshire, is living up to its motto, "Ever to excel". This summer the school posted its best set of A-level results in recent years, with 27.5 per cent of grades at A\* and 73.3 per cent at A\*-B. Soaring 52 places up the national table to 104, it is our **State Secondary School of the Year in the East Midlands 2025**.

"Our aim is to give our students the best possible start in life, through a broad curriculum and a wide range of enrichment activities and clubs beyond the classroom," Shona Buck, the head teacher, says.

The King's School, Grantham is the **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in**



IVAN QUETGLAS

“The holistic approach, not unlike Sir Isaac’s famous apple tree, continues to bear fruit”  
The King’s School, Grantham

Activities such as CCF are instrumental to Oundle’s success

the East Midlands 2025, taking the top spot regionally and rising 20 places nationally to break into the top 100, at 92.

This summer 49.4 per cent of all A-level exams were awarded A\* or A grades – 9.2 percentage points better than last year – while 78.1 per cent were graded A\*-B. A remarkable 17 students achieved a

clean sweep of A\* results. Simon Pickett, the headmaster of the all-boys grammar school, which can trace its roots to 1329 and educated Sir Isaac Newton, attributes the school's success in part to maintaining strong traditions while embracing science and new technologies.

"The school's illustrious past and forward-thinking leadership team have helped form the foundations of a school that strives to positively impact the

students' moral, social, cultural and academic development and values," Pickett says. "The holistic approach, not unlike Sir Isaac's famous apple tree, continues to bear fruit."

As well as setting high standards of behaviour and academic rigour, the King's School places emphasis on sport and extracurricular activities, competing locally and nationally in rugby, cricket and football and nationally in water polo. Clubs include jazz ensembles, orchestras, choirs and bands, while there is a flourishing Combined Cadet Force.

Northampton School for Boys, which admits girls in the sixth form, has slipped 15 places down the national rankings, from 179 to 194, but still records the best A-level and GCSE results of any comprehensive in the region. It has been crowned **Comprehensive School of the Year in the East Midlands 2025**. This summer 66 per cent of A-level grades were at A\*-B; at GCSE, 43 per cent of grades were at 9-7.

Matt Rodger, assistant head teacher at Northampton School for Boys, says that, while academic achievement is important, the curriculum is carefully designed to complement the school's extensive range of extracurricular activities.

"Our programme is incredibly broad and sits at the heart of our whole school vision to ensure that students achieve exceptionally well both in and outside the classroom," he says.

The school, which was founded in 1541, runs more than 80 sports clubs, ranging in level from beginners to elite athletes, and is ranked the top state school for competitive sport by School Sport magazine. Particular strengths include rugby (there are 18 rugby union teams and six rugby sevens teams), football (13 teams), basketball and cross-country, while students are also successful on and in the water, at rowing and water polo.

Alexandra Goss



MARK ZACCARIA

## West Midlands

Girls are powering ahead in the West Midlands. Leading the way is King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls, a selective grammar school in the Kings Heath suburb of Birmingham. The school, which dates from 1876 and is part of the King Edward VI Foundation, has risen ten places in the national table to break into the top ten. Doing so has earned it the accolade **State Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands 2025** and overall **State Secondary School of the Year 2025**.

For the first time the school's average A-level grade this summer was A, and 17 pupils secured places at Oxford or Cambridge. There was also a significant improvement in GCSE results, with 88 per cent at grade 9-7.

Karen Stevens, the head teacher, says the secret to her school's success is its commitment to providing a broad curriculum and challenging, carefully designed lessons, as well as "intervention to underpin students who might need a little extra support through dedicated learning mentors and specialist subject staff."

Welfare is just as important as academic success at the school, which celebrates its diverse, multicultural population. It runs 66 extracurricular clubs and encourages pupils to fundraise for local and national charities – they raised more than £10,000 last year.

A wellbeing hub will be ready for the next academic year, and a new art department and library are under construction on the 50-acre site.

Also building on its success is St Paul's School for Girls in Edgbaston, which has risen 17 places nationally to 73rd position, clinching the title of **Comprehensive Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands 2025**. Stratford Girls' Grammar School, in Stratford-upon-Avon, has soared 12 places to break into the top 20 state schools nationally, at 18, and wins **State Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands 2025**.

This year 86.7 per cent of the school's A-level grades were A\*-B – its best

Double first: King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls is a winner twice over

performance since 2018. The MedSoc programme, for aspiring medics, achieved a 100 per cent offer rate. Jacqui Cornell, the head teacher, says: "Our commitment to a broad and balanced curriculum ensures students are well prepared for university, apprenticeships or the world of work."

Outside the classroom, Stratford Girls' netball teams have celebrated success and there's a vibrant range of activities – including bhangra dancing, classics club, mock magistrates and a geospace club – many of which are led by sixth-formers.

Birmingham's King Edward VI Foundation continues to dominate the

West Midlands Parent Power tables. King Edward VI High School for Girls is named **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the West Midlands 2025** for the fourth consecutive year. This educational powerhouse is consistently top in the region for A-level and GCSE results and maintains its place in the national top ten.

Kirsty von Malaisé, principal of King Edward VI High School for Girls (and head of the King Edward VI Foundation), believes the school's elite performance is not only the result of expert teaching but "the outcome of our all-round education. Pupils get involved in a huge range of pursuits, be they in sport, the arts, clubs and societies, fundraising, or serving the local community."

Fees at the school, which offers means-tested bursaries through its assisted places scheme, are £17,862 a year for 2024-25. "Accessibility is at the heart of what we do, serving Birmingham and the wider region in the provision of what we regard as an unrivalled education for girls," von Malaisé says.

For the second year in a row Concord College, a school outside Shrewsbury comprising about 80 per cent boarders, with students of 37 different nationalities, is named **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the West Midlands 2025**. After breaking into the top 50 nationally last year, the school has continued its ascent, rising 15 places to 33.

Dr Michael Truss, the head teacher of Concord College, says the diverse, caring community is key to this forward-thinking place, which has no uniform and launched its first sustainability careers conference this term. "We were founded 75 years ago as an international school and we take the mission to bring academically enthusiastic children from across the world to study together and build understanding very seriously," Truss says. "For our local students there is an amazing opportunity to study in a genuinely international environment right here in the West Midlands."

This global outlook is reflected in the destinations of this summer's leavers: as well as achieving 118 Russell Group and ten Oxbridge places, another ten students went to the US to join institutions including the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania, as well as Johns Hopkins, UC Berkeley and UCLA.

Jayne Dowle

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## TOP 10

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Regional rank	National rank
1	The King's School, Grantham (92)
2	Caistor Grammar School 104
3	Kesteven and Sleaford High School 135
4	Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School 139
5	Bourne Grammar School 172=
6	Northampton School for Boys 194
7	St Mary's RC High School, Chesterfield 235
8	Littleover Community School 266
9	Queen Elizabeth's High School, Gainsborough 275
10	The Ecclesbourne School 278

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Regional rank	National rank
1	Nottingham High School (69=)
2	Oundle School 85
3	Leicester Grammar School 90=
4	Loughborough High School 112
5	Uppingham School 114=
6	Nottingham Girls' High School GDST 130=
7	Leicester High School for Girls 150
8	Derby High School 183
9	Repton School 216=
10	Oakham School 230

## TOP 10

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Regional rank	National rank
1	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Girls (10)
2	King Edward VI School, Stratford 11
3	Stratford Girls' Grammar School 18
4	King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys 21
5	King Edward VI Five Ways School 36
6	Bishop Vesey's Grammar School 42=
7	Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls 45
8	Newport Girls' High School 61
9	Lawrence Sheriff School 62
10	Wolverhampton Girls' High School 66

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Regional rank	National rank
1	King Edward VI High School for Girls, Birmingham (10)
2	Concord College 33
3	King Edward's School, Birmingham 44
4	RGS Worcester 104
5	Solihull School 118
6	Warwick School 121
7	Bromsgrove School 132
8	King's High School, Warwick 136
9	The King's School, Worcester 168
10	Bablake School 181



Parent Power

# The smartphone switch off

A school in Essex banned devices for three weeks – and let the scientists in. Here’s what happened next. *By Zoe Dare Hall*

Harry looks shellshocked. The 11-year-old has placed his smartphone into a glass box that won’t be unlocked for three weeks. “I’ve just put my life in there. It’s completely gone.” Harry is one of 26 pupils in Year 8 at the Stanway School in Colchester who have taken part in a groundbreaking phone ban experiment. Over 21 days in September they navigated life without their devices while researchers from the University of York monitored, minute by minute, the fluctuation in their mood, brain alertness and cognitive abilities. The purpose, explains Professor Lisa Henderson, a developmental cognitive

neuroscientist who led the experiment, is to answer this: “Does taking your phone away wake up your brain and put it in a better state for wellbeing and learning?” The experiment is documented in *Swiped: The School That Banned Smartphones*, a two-part film for Channel 4 presented by Emma and Matt Willis. The results will send the parents of screen-hooked offspring (which is probably most of them; almost all children – 97 per cent – now have mobile phones by the age of 12, according to Ofcom) on an emotional rollercoaster as they share their stories. You can’t help but be shocked, for example, when 12-year-old Esme admits that she routinely receives 2,000



WhatsApp messages a day. Or saddened when Liana, also 12, says that she was given her first phone at the age of four and “used my mum’s phone before that”. Another classmate, Ryley, admits he spent up to ten hours a day on his phone during the summer holidays. Many of the children report anxiety, panic attacks and struggling to sleep at night. Jessica, 12, was given a TikTok account on her tenth birthday and became the target of “a full-blown hate page”, she says, describing abuse on social media by someone who turned out

to be an adult posing as a young girl. She has suffered nightmares ever since. As the school’s safeguarding teacher, Alex MacPhail, observes: “Their lives are lived on their phones. Kids are anxious to the point where they can’t attend school. It used to be one or two. Now it’s two dozen per year group.” This Essex comprehensive is hardly alone. Its head teacher, John Player, reveals, alarmingly, that one in five students “in every single school” is spending more time on their phone than on their education. “That’s a ratio we

**A pupil getting measured by the University of York before her digital detox**

need to address,” he says. “This seems a chance to have genuine research into an area that doesn’t have it at the moment.” And so to the longest three weeks of the pupils’ lives. It’s the first experiment of its kind – “No one before has measured this scale of digital detox for this length of time,” says Dr Rangan Chatterjee, the doctor and author who guided these young guinea kids through their digital detox. The Willis, who are joining the Year 8s without phones, are “heavy phone users” too, Emma admits. As parents of children aged 8, 13 and 15 (who

refused to join them in the phone-ban experiment), “we’re living it”, she says. “Our youngest doesn’t have a phone, but the other two do and we see how much that is a part of their life now.” Matt adds that the moment his eldest daughter got Snapchat, aged 14, “that was the biggest disruptor between her and us”. As most parents will agree, access to tech is essential to so much of our lives now and crucial to their children’s future careers. “You don’t want your child to feel left out from friendship groups by not having a smartphone,” Emma says. “But we also need to protect them from what we now know is so damaging.” Despite their mournful looks as they hand over their devices, the Stanway pupils mostly handle the separation well. The girls start to chat face-to-face again, no longer distracted by screens. The boys play football and climb on swings. Theo, 12, reaches for a book. “The last time I read was four months ago,” he sighs. Maddie, 12, relishes going out on her bike. Reflecting on the experience two months on, Emma admits her own reaction to giving up her phone shocked her. “Going into it, I was mad for it and Matt was dreading it. Then, that first week, I really struggled and Matt thrived,” she says. “I’m a reluctant social media user, so I didn’t miss that at all. But I felt very out of control of my life and I spiralled quite a bit. I couldn’t do banking. Communication with the school is entirely through an app. It’s the convenience it gives us. Everything is so easy, including scrolling through stuff so you never have to think about anything or get bored.” She became “a woman possessed” to fill the time. Matt picked up his guitar. “I’d forgotten I enjoy it,” he says. As a recovering drug addict, he realised it was no exaggeration to describe people as being addicted to their devices. “I used to belittle it in my head. But when I think about it, I am addicted to my phone. When I’m without it I crave it. I act the same way about this device as I have about substances in the past.” When one of the pupils, Miles, suffers from stomach pains – his body’s reaction to his anxious thoughts, Chatterjee explains – it rings a bell with Matt. “These kids are suffering from full-on withdrawal symptoms from not having their phones. I



noticed phantom buzzing in my pocket during the three weeks.” Inevitably, as soon as the experiment ends and the glass box is opened, most of the schoolchildren scoop up their devices with unbridled glee. The University of York team will continue to release more findings as they analyse reams of data, but the preliminary results show some dramatic outcomes. The pupils all slept an extra hour a night on average. “I’m convinced that getting them to sleep better is one of the ways to tackle the mental health epidemic in children and young adults,” Chatterjee says. They also showed fewer symptoms linked to anxiety and depression. And – flying in the face of “social” media – the children said they felt more socially connected during the phone ban. “They realised that human connection is not found through a device,” says Emma, who advocates for a “multipronged approach, with tech companies, the government, parents and schools working together”.

**Stanway School pupils left their phones in a box before the tests**

Many of the children loved having more family time again. Almost every parent felt they had got their child back. And the teachers noticed far greater alertness in class. “Their eye contact skills in just a couple of weeks seem better than they used to be,” Player says. Scarlett, 13, “is like a different student”, another teacher notes; she can see the difference in herself too. “I feel more sociable, I concentrate better, sleep better and in lessons I’m more focused,” she says. It’s powerful stuff. And the parents are berating themselves for being the ones who gave their child the phone in the first place. When asked if he’s looking forward to getting his phone back, 12-year-old Isaac pauses. “Yes and no. I feel like I don’t really need it any more.” You can hear a pin drop as every parent dares to believe there is hope after all. **Swiped: The School That Banned Smartphones is on Channel 4 and available to stream from Wednesday and Thursday**

**90%** of girls and 50% of boys say they have received explicit content they didn’t want to see

**1 in 6** teens reported being cyberbullied in one month, according to the World Health Organisation

**237** The number of smartphone notifications the average teen receives a day – one every few minutes

## Meet the oldest head teacher in Britain, who won’t retire

At 82, David Kershaw has seen it all. And now “Sir” has lessons for teachers, pupils – and their pushy parents. He talks to *Sian Griffiths*

In more than six decades at the chalkface, “Killer Kershaw”, 82, has dealt with teachers on strike and pupils who swore at and assaulted staff. He once had to face up to a violent father, who had a racist slogan tattooed across his forehead, after he sent the man’s daughter home for dyeing her hair. He just keeps on going. David Kershaw, a former PE and RE teacher and now head teacher who has turned around four failing schools in Coventry, Leicester and Bradford, has tried to retire. “But officials from the

Department of Education ring up and say, “David, we have this school and wondered whether you would help us out ...” At a time when half of teachers quit the profession within five years, Kershaw, who was written off as “not very bright” at his secondary modern school in Bradford and signed for Huddersfield Town football club aged 14 under the manager Bill Shankly, is unique. Shankly paid for Kershaw’s first three weeks of personal tuition to get his O-levels in English, geography and British constitution. In 1965, in Kershaw’s first job in a



Peterborough school, teachers still used blackboard and chalk, children would stand up when staff entered a classroom and he was addressed as “Sir”. Now he is the chief executive for the Inspiring Lives Education Trust, which will soon run three schools in the Midlands. His No 1 lesson drummed home to children in every school he has led is to

work hard and be resilient. He was devastated when Shankly dropped him in his teens and told him he would pay for him to be a teacher rather than a footballer, but Kershaw buckled down on a correspondence course to get the O-levels and A-levels he needed to get to college and qualify as a teacher. Such perseverance has served Kershaw, and

**‘Killer Kershaw’ has spent six decades at the chalkface**

generations of pupils he has taught, well. In 2017 he was sent to Lordswood Boys’ School, which was in special measures, where the catchment area included “drug-ridden parts of Birmingham”. Fewer than one in ten children passed maths and English GCSEs, and teachers locked themselves in classrooms to escape being tormented by marauding gangs of children; within 18 months 40 per cent of teachers were replaced. Today it is one of the highest-achieving non-grammar schools in the city, with GCSE results well above the national average. In 2018 its pupil James Cheath won a music scholarship to Eton. What is Kershaw’s trick? A zero-tolerance approach to bad behaviour took only two months to pay dividends. Every time a boy told a teacher to “f\*\*\* off” they were taken out of lessons, their parents were contacted and they were sent home for a day. “The penny soon dropped,” he recalls. The ultimate sanction was “permanent exclusion”. He advises all prospective parents to check pupils’ behaviour, and notes that you want a school whose attendance record is more than 95 per cent. “If teachers in 2024 don’t establish rules [for good behaviour] quickly then

the atmosphere can become toxic,” he says. “In 1965 you had many months to operate ineffectively as a teacher before pupils took advantage of it.” For Kershaw a uniform is “vitaly important”. When he was executive head teacher at Bradford Academy, “little 11-year-olds arrived in school in deep snow with summer dresses on and no outdoor jackets”. He got sponsorship from local businesses to buy all pupils a uniform, including a blazer, shirts, tie, jumpers and an outdoor coat. The introduction of a uniform, which gave children a sense of



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**David Kershaw, middle back row, was a keen footballer before he swapped the pitch for the classroom**

pride, also played a part in turning around New College Leicester, where Kershaw was appointed as executive principal in 2005. Between 1999 and 2005 the 1,600-pupil secondary school had been described as one of the worst in the country. Students wandered out of lessons to buy burgers from food vans and if the fire alarm was set off only twice in a day it was deemed a quiet day. In 2005 40 staff threatened to strike after 12 assaults by pupils in four months. In the same year a national newspaper reported that teachers were afraid to walk the corridors. Teachers quit and 28 temporary teachers had to be hired from Australia to plug the gap. By 2017, however, measures including strong sports, arts and behaviour policies helped the school to be judged “good” by Ofsted. Bringing in a uniform enabled pupils who misbehaved on the streets to be identified, he says. And if children flouted the uniform rules – as a 14-year-old pupil at New College did when she turned up “leaving little to the imagination” – they were moved to a room until their parents arrived with approved clothing. Similarly, he believes schools should not ban smartphones, but enforce rules that they cannot be taken out of bags. The first time

the rule is broken the phone is confiscated for a day; the second time the confiscation is permanent. The biggest difference in schools that Kershaw has noticed in recent years, however, is a growing lack of respect among some parents for teachers. He says there is an “increasing minority of aggressive, critical parents who can make life extremely stressful and worrying for teachers”. As for helicopter parents who demand that their child be chosen for the school play or similar, he has dealt with those too. Firmly. “If they continue to insist I overrule a teacher colleague to enable their child to be in a team, for instance, I calmly advise them there is a very good school down the road.” Finally, he has no regrets – and no plans to retire just yet – and urges older teachers to stay in post. “It keeps us young,” he says. “Despite the challenges teachers face, together we can transform children’s lives.” *David Kershaw received a lifetime achievement award at the Pearson National Teaching Awards 2024. To nominate someone for the 2025 awards, which the Sunday Times is proud to co-sponsor, go to [teachingawards.com](https://teachingawards.com)*

# Parent Power

## East Anglia

If you walk round Impington Village College you will see students hard at work. But their desks might be empty: they could be throwing a vase on the pottery wheel, doing a downward dog in yoga, or practising fencing lunges and parries (and polishing their French while they're at it).

Impington Village College, on the northern outskirts of Cambridge, is an educational high achiever and has soared 37 places in the national rankings to break into the top 100, a feat that earns it the title **Comprehensive School of the Year 2025**, as well as **Comprehensive School of the Year in East Anglia 2025**. The first UK state secondary to be authorised to deliver three International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes, the college is about much more than academic achievement. Pupils are taught resilience, critical thinking and communication skills. They also benefit from the iCas enrichment programme, which provides 50 experiences within the timetable.

As well as having an international outlook and prioritising student and staff mental health – the college is a pioneer flexible working ambassador school – inclusivity is key to its ethos. Among the 1,432 pupils are more than 120 with EHCPs

(education, health and care plans), many of whom have complex conditions such as cerebral palsy or Down's syndrome. "Our students achieve exceptional outcomes regardless of their starting points," Victoria Hearn, the principal, says.

King Edward VI Grammar School in Chelmsford, known as KEGS, is the **State Secondary School of the Year in East Anglia 2025**. Founded in 1551, the school, which is boys-only but has a mixed sixth form, has risen two places. "Data outcomes matter, but our primary focus is on creating and maintaining opportunity and excellence in all spheres," Tom Carter, its head teacher, says.

Colchester Royal Grammar School takes the **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in East Anglia 2025** title. This summer a third of A-level grades at this boys' school,

which admits girls in the sixth form, were A\* and 92.2 per cent were A\*-B.

Four East Anglian private schools are in the top 100, with Cambridge schools continuing to dominate. Sawston Village College, six miles from the city, is **State 11-16 Secondary School of the Year 2025**. The Perse School in Cambridge tops the regional tables and is named **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in East Anglia 2025** for the second year running. Third in the regional tables and rising 13

places to enter the top 100, Chigwell School is **Independent Secondary School of the Year in East Anglia 2025**.

The coeducational school has implemented a series of changes in recent years. Damian King, the head, says: "These include a new scholarship programme, and a new enrichment curriculum for Year 7s, which includes lessons in entrepreneurship, psychology, careers, sustainability, digital citizenship and metacognition."

Alexandra Goss



**KEGS gives its pupils a range of creative outlets**

## TOP 10

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1 Colchester Royal Grammar School (7)	
Regional rank	National rank
2	King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford 9
3	Chelmsford County High School for Girls 20
4	Westcliff High School for Boys 40
5	Southend High School For Boys 55
6	Southend High School for Girls 58
7	Westcliff High School for Girls 69
8	Impington Village College 78=
9	Colchester County High School for Girls 97=
10	The King's (The Cathedral) School, Peterborough 190

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

1 The Perse School (34)	
Regional rank	National rank
2	The Leys 92
3	Chigwell School 94
4	Ipswich School 116
5	Kimbolton School 117
6	Norwich School 138
7	Stephen Perse Senior School 151
8	Abbey College Cambridge 164
9	Norwich High School for Girls GDST 166
10	New Hall School 178

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# North



exam results. Of the GCSE year group, 55.3 per cent gained grades 9-7. Similar success was repeated at A-level: one third of Year 13 gained straight As or higher.

Founded in 1912, the 860-pupil Hill House has opened an art school, music school and fitness centre. It is also extending bus routes to bring in pupils from as far afield as Pontefract, Gainsborough, Sheffield and Worksop, plus outlying villages. Year 7 sports scholarships will be introduced in September next year.

Thriving in and out of the classroom is the key to success at Queen Ethelburga's College, York, which is **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the North 2025**. "Students being curious and having a natural love of learning translates into academic achievement," Steven Turner, its head, says. Pupils are encouraged to stretch and challenge themselves by going beyond the curriculum, taking part in student-led societies, such as Model UN and UK Bebras, a computational thinking challenge, and maths and science Olympiads.

The **Comprehensive School of the Year in the North 2025** is also in York. Fulford School jumped 17 places up the national table with a fifth of A-level passes achieving A\*. Russell Harris, who became its head teacher in 2023, says this feat – to the envy of many private schools – is achieved by inspiring confidence from Year 7 onwards, backed by pastoral support and team spirit. "Fulford excels in sports at all levels, with elite athletes shining across various disciplines," Harris

**Jolly hockey sticks! Hill House School, Doncaster, rose 40 places in the UK rankings**

**M**ounting a challenge to the dominance of high-performing North Yorkshire private schools, Hill House School, in Auckley, takes the winning rosette as **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the North 2025**.

The coeducational day school, five miles from Doncaster Racecourse, has jumped ten places in the regional rankings and broken into the top 200 independent schools in the country thanks to strong

## TOP 10

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

1	Heckmondwike Grammar School (80)	Regional rank	National rank
2	Ripon Grammar School		146
3	St Mary's College		150=
4	Fulford School		172=
5	Silverdale School		174
6	High Storrs School		177
7	Archbishop Holgate's School		189
8	Skipton Girls' High School		201
9	North Halifax Grammar School		217
10	Tapton School		223=

says. "Ultimate frisbee is a standout part of our extracurricular program, with more than a hundred students attending the after-school clubs."

In winning the double – **State Secondary School of the Year in the North 2025** and **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the North 2025** – Heckmondwike Grammar School in West Yorkshire shows its true colours. Peter Roberts, the head teacher, highlights the fact that all GCSE pupils take a minimum of ten subjects: six core courses plus four options. "The A-level curriculum is taught by graduates in their chosen subject, with

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

1	Queen Ethelburga's College (21=)	Regional rank	National rank
2	Sheffield Girls' GDST		114=
3	The Grammar School at Leeds		122
4	St Peter's School		125
5	Bradford Grammar School		174
6	Hill House School		179
7	The Mount School York		191
8	The Faculty of Queen Ethelburga's		192
9	Birkdale School		195=
10	Hymers College		211=

many staff holding further degrees and qualifications," Roberts says. "We teach beyond the curriculum, ensuring a detailed and thorough understanding of subjects."

"Our Latin motto, *Nil sine labore* – 'nothing without work' – supports us in achieving the highest academic standards, but our unofficial motto of 'working hard and playing hard', ensures we are not a one-trick-pony of exam results," Roberts adds. "We offer over a hundred co-curricular clubs, including all sports, music, drama, drone flying, chess and debating."

Jayne Dowle



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# Parent Power

## Northeast



**T**he comprehensive Durham Johnston School proves its northeastern grit with a double win, taking the title of **Secondary School of the Year in the Northeast 2025** for the second year running and **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Northeast 2025**, rising more than 20 places.

The head teacher, Rosslyn McFadden, is proud to oversee a “really

**Pupils are never bored at Durham Johnston School**

comprehensive school in the widest sense of the word”. “Our school takes a lot of pupils from the former mining villages. We have admissions from 43 different primary schools.”

The range of post-18 destinations is just as comprehensive. Seven leavers began at Oxford or Cambridge University this year, four headed to the University of Edinburgh, three to the London School of Economics and Political Science and two to Imperial College London. Students also started degree apprenticeships with companies such as Nissan and Siemens and as far afield as Germany.

McFadden believes inclusivity allows the school’s guiding principle of social justice to shine through. “We pride ourselves in supporting all our students to be the very best version of themselves,” she says.

The Royal Grammar School (RGS) in Newcastle is consistently impressive, and has won the **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Northeast 2025**. The co-ed day school, which celebrates its 500th anniversary in 2025, consistently tops the regional tables by some distance, ranking 56 nationally. Its dedication to means-tested bursaries – with one in sixteen children receiving a free education – has enabled 484 students to be supported since 2002.

“We make ‘levelling up’ a reality rather than a soundbite,” says the head teacher, Geoffrey Stanford. RGS runs at least 50 academic and co-curricular projects in partnership with more than 100 other schools from Berwick to Middlesbrough – covering a huge range of subjects, from

the sciences, technology, engineering, sport and robotics to art, languages, classics, debating and Ucas application mentoring. “The challenges facing education and young people at the moment can only be solved through partnership and collaboration,” Stanford says. “We have the ability to make a wider impact beyond the school walls with RGS partnerships and bursaries.”

Similarly, at Durham High School, named **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Northeast 2025**, success is rooted in the community. The school leapt 61 places up the national table but still has big ambitions, and places significant focus on Stem subjects.

“We are not just a school, we are a legacy, empowering girls to lead, achieve and inspire for over 140 years,” Michelle Hill, the head teacher, says. “We believe in embracing sisterhood. When girls are empowered, the world changes”.

They are also competitive, taking part in chemistry and biology Olympiads and the Institution of Civil Engineers CityZen competition, in which eight sixth-formers worked on a digital game and video to improve local lives. Others secured prestigious Arkwright Engineering Scholarships.

At the co-ed Durham School, Kieran McLaughlin, the headmaster, credits “two strong year groups who have weathered the interruptions to their education and worked really hard to achieve their results” for the school’s climb of 23 places in the national league table, against relative falls elsewhere in the region.

**Jayne Dowle**

## TOP 8

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Rank	School	Regional rank	National rank
1	Durham Johnston School (155=)		
2	Emmanuel College, Tyne and Wear	183	
3	Ponteland High School		213
4	Queen Elizabeth High School, Hexham		267
5	The King Edward VI School, Morpeth	301	
6	Kings Priory School		302
7	Sacred Heart RC High School, Newcastle		305=
8	Carmel College		316

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

**1** Royal Grammar School, Newcastle (56)

Rank	School	Regional rank	National rank
1	Royal Grammar School, Newcastle (56)		
2	Durham High School		126
3	Yarm School		173
4	Newcastle High School for Girls GDST	176=	
5	Dame Allan's Girls' School		190
6	Dame Allan's Boys' School		232
7	Durham School		270
8	Newcastle School for Boys		299

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# Northwest

**A**ffluent Altrincham in Greater Manchester rules the educational roost when it comes to the state sector in the northwest, one of the most competitive in the country.

Honours go to Altrincham Grammar School for Girls (AGGS), believed to be the biggest single-sex grammar school in England, which takes the win and is **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Northwest 2025**.

“There was a great deal to celebrate,” Stephanie Gill, the principal, says. “A remarkable 19 students achieved A\* grades across the board.”

It led to a two-place increase to rank eighth in the national Parent Power league table. But it is the all-girls Catholic Loreto Grammar School, which climbed from 70 to 23 and takes second place in the region, that wins **State Secondary School of the Year in the Northwest 2025**.

“Our founder, Mary Ward – 1585 to 1645 – said, ‘I hope in God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much,’ and here we are, 400 years later,” Jane Beever, the head of Loreto, says. “We want our girls to be critical thinkers. We’re all about the flourishing of young women. We believe that where your daughter is happy she will learn.”

Such a belief is borne out in the A-level and GCSE results, but also the school’s Progress 8 (a “value-added” measure indicating how much progress is made at secondary school). This is an impressive 1.1, meaning that, on average, students achieved at least a grade higher than they were expected to at the start of secondary school.

Matching a nationwide trend, Beevers says: “Not everyone wants university. We’ve been celebrating our girls going on to high-level apprenticeships. We’ve got one girl doing building in Manchester, and another working for PwC in Leeds. We have an apprenticeship nurture group in the sixth form.”

Another all-girls school, the Tauheedul Islam Girls’ High School and Sixth Form College (TIGHS) in Blackburn, Lancashire, takes the title of **State Faith Secondary School of the Year 2025**.

The school, which welcomes girls from all faiths and none, opened in 1984 and has grown to become one of the most highly praised faith schools in the UK. Its 854 pupils are involved in a huge range of activities, from undertaking Duke of Edinburgh Awards on a two-day hike from East Lancashire to the Peak District, to BTEC health and social care students working with people suffering from dementia.

This summer 41.1 per cent of GCSE results were graded 9/8, while 54.3 per cent of A-level grades were A\*/A and 82.7 per cent were A\*-B.

Mufti Hamid Patel, chief executive of Star Academies, the national 36-school-strong multi-academy trust that TIGHS belongs to, says: “Our mission extends far beyond academic success. This recognition affirms our commitment to nurturing and empowering young people of strong character, guided by their faith and values, and helping them to thrive and make meaningful contributions to society.”

In Liverpool it is another faith school, King David High School – school motto, “Let there be light through faith and work” – that wins **Comprehensive School of the Year in the Northwest 2025**. King David’s is the only Jewish



secondary school in the city, with an estimated 10 per cent of pupils actively practising the faith, but it welcomes students of all faiths along with 18 places for pupils showing musical talent.

“We are extremely pleased that 85 per cent of students achieved the grades to gain places at their first-choice university,” Michael Sutton, the head teacher, says. “In Hebrew there are three words for community,” he continues. “We are told that *kehilla* is the best type of community – one which recognises the individuality of its constituent members, working together for a common good.”

Over the past year, Sutton adds, the school has “worked closely with members of the Muslim and Christian communities, both within and outside the school, to proactively ensure we all feel supportive

**Earning their stripes: Loreto Grammar School rose 47 places in the national rankings. Below: pupils at Withington Girls’ School are top of the northwest league**

of each other, especially in times when this goes against the grain.”

Across the water on the Wirral, Birkenhead School wins **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Northwest 2025**. In third place and an entry to the top ten northwest

## TOP 10

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Rank	School	Regional rank	National rank
1	Altrincham Grammar School for Girls (8)		
2	Loreto Grammar School		23
3	Altrincham Grammar School for Boys		24
4	The Liverpool Blue Coat School		37
5	Sale Grammar School		48
6	Tauheedul Islam Girls’ High School and Sixth Form College		59=
7	Lancaster Girls’ Grammar School		82
8	St Ambrose College		91
9	Urmston Grammar		102
10	Lancaster Royal Grammar School		114

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Rank	School	Regional rank	National rank
1	Withington Girls’ School (25=)		
2	The Manchester Grammar School		76
3	Birkenhead School		81
4	Manchester High School for Girls		83
5	The Grange School		127
6	The King’s School, Chester		130=
7	The Queen’s School		157=
8	The King’s School in Macclesfield		169
9	Stockport Grammar School		195=
10	Bolton School Girls’ Division		204



MARK WAUGH

independent schools, this all-through co-ed with almost a thousand pupils offers a robust alternative to north Liverpool’s established indies such as Merchant Taylors’.

Paul Vicars, the headmaster, says the school is becoming a favourite with parents in well-heeled suburbs such as Woolton – “the River Mersey is no longer a barrier” – plus northwest Cheshire and north Wales, thanks to a network of school buses. “Seriously, we’re a happy school, a really tight community,” Vicars adds. “Our science is particularly strong. We have a significant number of students going on to study medicine.”

Sport is also a school passion: “With boys it’s rugby and hockey, and we love our cricket in the summer. Our girls have got a national reputation in lacrosse and netball. They’ve been known to give one or two of the bigger southern schools a bit of a hiding.”

It has blazed up the league table as well. The school, which is the alma mater of Tony Hall, former director general of the BBC, has risen 118 places to 81 in the national league table.

The **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Northwest 2025** goes to Withington Girls’ School, a 7-18 day school in Fallowfield, Manchester. At A-level 40.7 per cent of passes were A\* and 92.9 per cent of A-level passes were A\*-B.

“Our founding ethos – that a love of learning is its own reward – is not simply a line that appears in our prospectus or is included in talks at open events,” Sarah Haslam, the headmistress, says. “It’s something we demonstrate on a day-to-day basis as part of school life. We’re unusual in not awarding academic prizes and there are no scholarships awarded on entry to the school. When we interview girls before making offers in senior school or sixth form we are looking for evidence of a natural enthusiasm for learning.”

Jayne Dowle

Parent Power

Southwest

Liz Gregory took up her post as head teacher of the Maynard School in September 2022, and her vision, based on investing in pedagogy and evidence-formed practice, has borne fruit. The school, in Exeter, has risen 37 places to make it into the national top 100 independent schools, is the only one in the regional top ten that went up in the rankings, and takes the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year in the Southwest 2025**. At the single-sex girls' school, where senior school fees start at £5,900 a term, the culture of curiosity and of a love of learning is shared by the pupils and the staff. "It's not just about teaching a group [GCSE class size is a maximum of 20, with 8-12 at A-level] but teaching one to one," Gregory says. "It starts with the teaching staff. They are all experts in their field, went to top universities and have love and passion for their subjects. It means that they can go beyond the bounds of the syllabus and the curriculum." This, she argues, is directly reflected in the results: "If you couple this with a love of learning, pupils are happier in themselves and perform better." This year more than 10 per cent of students got a place at Oxford or Cambridge.

**“Students worked on the sixth-form design, which has quiet booths to help those who are neurodivergent”**  
The Maynard School

Stem and humanities. "Girls can study physics and fashion and textiles, or English, chemistry and maths," Gregory says. Students have also worked with teachers on the refurbishment of the sixth-form centre, which opened this term, and has quiet booths to help those who have been diagnosed with ADHD and/or are neurodivergent. Being sensitive to the needs of pupils in and out of the classroom has also helped Cheltenham Ladies' College to yet again get the top exam results in the region. It is awarded **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Southwest 2025**. "I am extremely proud of the dedication and agility shown by our pupils, who have handled the rapidly changing landscape with maturity and perseverance throughout their studies," Eve Jardine-Young, the principal, says. "Their efforts give me great hope for future generations." The same mood of optimism is found at The Cotswold School, the **Comprehensive School of the Year in the Southwest 2025**, which has soared 77 places to rank 169 in the Parent Power national tables. "You don't get these results if the students don't feel supported and don't feel safe. You need the fundamentals in place," Will Morgan, the head teacher, says. He is keen to emphasise support from the community for the academy



school in the village of Bourton-on-the-Water. "We are a rural school and the strength of the school is everyone pulling together," Morgan says. "The PTA is strong, we raise money for school funds, and a local benefactor has helped by

paying for new Astroturf." Community support – financial and pastoral – also helps those from more disadvantaged backgrounds to enjoy the privileges of school trips and music lessons. "This is a brilliant generation," he adds. "They are

**Centre stage: Stroud High School takes the regional title for state secondary school of the year**

resilient and inspiring. If they got through the past five years and are still ready to face whatever life throws at them, then the future is in safe hands." Mark McShane, the head teacher of Stroud High School, which has jumped more than 50 places in the national league table to rank 68, and take **State Secondary School of the Year in the Southwest 2025**, agrees that a sense of belonging is key to academic success. "It's about creating a positive environment for teachers and pupils who are enthusiastic and want to learn. The staff work their socks off," McShane says. This year there were record applications for places in the main school and sixth form. The appeal? "Enrichment. In Years 7 and 8 pupils have to sing in a choir and do a sports club. We also have trips, as part of Turing Scheme projects, to France, Germany, Thailand and South Korea." In November the mayor of Paju province in South Korea visited the school. McShane is launching a new digital strategy to be a "21st-century grammar school". Everything in the sixth form is now taught on devices, and after two years of staff training this will be rolled out across the school. Consistency is the name of the education game in Cheltenham, and it is no surprise that Pate's Grammar School once again tops the regional rankings for exam performance – a record 40 students got a place at Oxford or Cambridge – and, at fifth in the national table, is **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in the Southwest**



**2025**. It is also no surprise that it is vastly oversubscribed, with more than 2,500 pupils sitting the 11-plus examination to gain one of the 150 places available at Pate's, one of seven grammar schools in the county. (There are plans to target primary schools in areas of high deprivation to broaden access to disadvantaged pupils and to consider contextual admissions.) Dr James Richardson, the head teacher, acknowledges that the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic still lingers, and that schools need to be a support centre offering nurture and care, as well as lessons. "The academic cannot be

picked apart from the pastoral," Richardson says. "We want pupils to be able to feel fully themselves, and fulfil their own expectations. We celebrate everyone's achievements." Richardson has launched a smartphone policy known as the four Pate's Ps: privacy, protection, parameters (good habits) and presence. The result? "The library is busier than ever at lunchtime, there are societies from sign language to astrophysics. Parents are thrilled too, and can see their children are rediscovering their passions and talents." **Helen Davies**

**Optimism and dedication, plus significant community support, has helped The Cotswold School to rise up the rankings**

TOP 10

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

<b>1</b>	Pate's Grammar School (5)	Regional rank	National rank
2	Colyton Grammar School	19	
3	Sir Thomas Rich's School	44	
4	Stroud High School	68	
5	Denmark Road High School	76	
6	Devonport High School for Girls	84	
7	Bishop Wordsworth's School	85	
8	Bournemouth School for Girls	87	
9	South Wilts Grammar School	96	
10	Torquay Girls' Grammar School	99	

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

<b>1</b>	Cheltenham Ladies' College (54)	Regional rank	National rank
2	St Mary's Calne	71=	
3	King Edward's School, Bath	87	
4	The Maynard School	99	
5	Marlborough College	103	
6	Canford School	107	
7	Exeter School	108=	
8	Redmaids' High School	124	
9	Bristol Grammar School	137	
10	Kingswood School	141	

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# Parent Power

## Northern Ireland

CHRIS SEMPLE PHOTOGRAPHY

**W**ith five schools in the top 50 state schools in the UK, Northern Ireland continues to excel on a national level despite the buffeting climate of educational change. The Independent Review of Education, a root-and-branch rethink of Northern Irish schooling, continues to tackle challenges, including curriculum development, disadvantage and funding.

It hasn't stopped Friends' School in Lisburn, which tops the Parent Power league table and wins **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in Northern Ireland 2025**. The school motto, "Seek those things that are above", serves it well.

The only Quaker school in Northern Ireland, Friends' School has dropped 11 places from last year but still ranks 32 in the UK table. At A-level 91.3 per cent of students achieved three or more passes at grades A\*-C, and every single student at GCSE achieved five or more passes at grades 9-5.

"This is the first time we've been at the top of the academic table," Stephen Moore, the principal, says. "We've had a focus on learning and teaching in the past six years or so. Our results have stayed well above pre-pandemic standards."

With more than a thousand pupils, the school, established by the Religious

Society of Friends for just 30 boys and girls in 1774, celebrated its 250th anniversary this year.

"We've been thinking a lot about the Quaker heritage and our ethos," Moore says. "I suppose that as a Quaker school we have appeal across the community, and this is seen in an increasingly diverse school population." Just behind Friends' School, and second in Northern Ireland,

### TOP 10

#### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**1** Friends' School Lisburn (32)

Regional rank	National rank
2= Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School	34=
2= Strathearn School	34=
4 Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock	41
5 St Dominic's Grammar School for Girls	50
6 St Louis Grammar School	51
7 Rathmore Grammar School	52
8 St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	53
9 Lumen Christi College	56
10 Sullivan Upper School	65



comes Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School, Belfast. The 970-strong Catholic co-ed climbed 34 places to tie with another Belfast school, the all-girls grammar Strathearn School, at 34 in the UK table. With 59.4 per cent A\*-A grades at A-level, the best results in the region, Aquinas Diocesan is our **State Secondary School of the Year in Northern Ireland 2025**.

Dr Marie Dowling, the principal, says: "it is down to the outstanding achievements of our pupils, the dedication of our staff and governors and the incredible partnership that exists

between our school and parents. We work closely with the other schools in our area and have strong links to local universities. Around 50 per cent of our students this year have gone on to Queen's University Belfast or Ulster University."

They are pitch perfect when it comes to football too. In November Sophie Kelly-Bradley, an Aquinas girl who has already played for her country at Under-17 level, was named in the Northern Ireland Women's squad for three upcoming qualifiers for the 2025 Uefa Women's Under-19 Championship.

Jayne Dowle

**Deep roots: Friends' Lisburn School takes the top spot in the region**



**Chigwell School**  
AUT VIAM INVENIAM AUT FACIAM

**The Sunday Times  
Independent Secondary School  
of the Year 2025 East Anglia**

THE SUNDAY TIMES  
**SCHOOLS GUIDE  
2025**  
INDEPENDENT SECONDARY  
SCHOOL OF THE YEAR  
EAST ANGLIA



Established in 1629, Chigwell is a top co-educational day and boarding school for 4-18 year olds situated on an extensive 100-acre campus.

# Scotland



Every week more than a third of senior pupils at Jordanhill School in Glasgow learn to play an instrument and take part in music ensembles, from fiddle or percussion groups to an orchestra. Hundreds turn out on Saturday mornings for football, netball, hockey and rugby, and there's an early-morning running club for those who want to start the day with a spring in their step.

This, the rector, John Anderson, says, is part of the alchemy that has helped Jordanhill, Scotland's best-performing state school, to top our Parent Power league table consistently since 1993. He believes such endeavours instil a good work ethic and help pupils to develop resilience to bounce back from failure.

Sitting in his office, which looks out on to sports pitches, Anderson says: "One of our school aims is to promote enjoyment and encourage wider interests." In addition to myriad clubs and societies, the school's Educational Amenities Trust

funds activities such as hiring re-enactors to bring the Battle of Bannockburn to life for S1 pupils, and maths competition entries to encourage mass participation.

The school motto is *Ad summa nitior*: Strive for the highest. "One of the phrases we use is that we believe you can achieve more than you think you can achieve," Anderson says. Last year 97 per cent of pupils achieved five or more National 5s, while 89 per cent gained five or more Highers and 57 per cent left school with two or more Advanced Highers. Typically 85-90 per cent of leavers go to university.

In recognition of Jordanhill's remarkable record we name it our **State Secondary School of the Year in Scotland 2025** and **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in Scotland 2025**. The all-through school, originally the demonstration school for the former teacher training college, is unusual in many ways. It is the only mainstream

**A tug-of-war contest at Jordanhill School, a heavyweight in the Scottish state sector**

school funded directly by the Scottish government and has its own strict admissions criteria, with a catchment area based not on geography but a list of specific addresses. The 66 places in P1 and 33 in S1 are allocated on a first come, first served basis with no exceptions – not even for the rector, who lives outside the catchment. Parents brandishing birth certificates to register their newborns are a regular sight at the school, which has a waiting list of 1,700.

In the independent sector, schools in the Scottish capital dominate. St Mary's Music School in Edinburgh retains its position as the best performer in the Scottish exam system, earning it our **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in Scotland 2025** title. The school's academic success highlights the benefits that a music education, which requires focus and commitment, brings, says the head teacher, Dr Kenneth Taylor.

The Edinburgh Academy moves up five

## TOP 5

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**1** Jordanhill School (1)

Regional rank	Last year's rank
2	Bearsden Academy 2
3	Mearns Castle High School 8
4	Boroughmuir High School 7
5	St Ninian's High School, Giffnock 3

### INDEPENDENT (A-LEVELS)

**1** Fettes College (143)

Regional rank	National rank
2	St Leonards School 160
3	Merchiston Castle School 288
4	Loretto School 321

### INDEPENDENT (HIGHERS)

**1** St Mary's Music School (1)

Regional rank	Last year's rank
2	George Heriot's School 3
3	The Mary Erskine School 4
4	The Glasgow Academy 2
5	The High School of Glasgow 5

places to sixth, helping it to clinch our **Independent School of the Year in 2025** title. "Always excel" is the motto of the school, where the 670 senior pupils flourish in and out of the classroom.

Fettes College in Edinburgh, alma mater of the former prime minister Tony Blair, is the top performer among Scottish fee-paying schools teaching GCSEs and A-levels, becoming our **Secondary Independent of the Year for Academic Excellence in Scotland 2025**.

Sue Leonard

# Wales

Cowbridge School may have dropped "comprehensive" from its name, now that it has become a 3-18 school, but it is continuing on its inclusive mission. The high-performing school has slipped two places in the national rankings to joint 133, but it is the only state school in Wales in the Parent Power top 200 and does the double, taking **State Secondary School of the Year in Wales 2025** and **State Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in Wales 2025**.

Debra Thomas, the head teacher, asks the same question of herself and her staff as she does the pupils: "What does excellence look like?" She maintains the same philosophy to get everyone there: "Failing is a good part of learning."

The buzzword of the moment, however, is metacognition. "We are working to understand the neuroscience of the adolescent brain, and just how it learns," Thomas says. "This way we can look at better revision techniques, but also how to move beyond memorisation and develop thinking skills."

At the Cathedral School, Llandaff "boost groups" and a new wellbeing



NEIL PHILLIPS

survey have helped students to navigate the return to 2019 grade boundaries, rising 14 places in the national table to 63. It takes the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year in Wales 2025** for the second year in a row.

Clare Sherwood, the head teacher, has introduced a revised assessment that makes it harder for boys and girls to answer with what they think the teachers want to see. "It encourages conversation," Sherwood says. "We've focused on Year 11

**Lessons in chemistry: students at Cardiff Sixth Form College are "passionate nerds"**

## TOP 8

### SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**1** Cowbridge School (133=)

Regional rank	National rank
2	Olchfa School 202=
3	Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin 221
4	Crickhowell High School 265
5	Ysgol Bro Preseli 281
6	Ysgol Eirias 298
7	Bishop Vaughan RC School 300
8	Llanidloes High School 336=

### INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

**1** Cardiff Sixth Form College (37)

Regional rank	National rank
2	St John's College, Cardiff 51=
3	St Michael's School 62
4	The Cathedral School, Llandaff 63
5	Westbourne School 84
6	Howell's School, Llandaff GDST 133=
7	Ruthin School 171
8	St Gerard's School Trust 200=

to capture those we knew had it in them but who still needed to find their mojo."

Indeed, talking seems to have been the secret to the school's success, with committed staff holding boost groups of three or four students and chatting through what they might be struggling with. "The aim is to feel more confident," Sherwood says. "Confidence not arrogance. It's about encouraging them to feel more comfortable about who they are in their own skin."

It is the same for Tom Arrand, the principal of Cardiff Sixth Form College, who proudly acknowledges that his "school is for full-on passionate academic nerds". It takes the No 1 spot and the title of **Independent Secondary School of the Year for Academic Excellence in Wales 2025**. The school runs three sets of mocks in full exam conditions to help prepare pupils for the real thing.

Since the pandemic Arrand has also re-energised extracurricular activities so pupils spend their spare time at more than 45 clubs, from Nasa, philosophy and debate society to medical ethics. There are ten fully funded scholarships available, and four members of staff have weekly catch-ups with A-level students to discuss careers and higher education.

Arrand says: "I believe we are more focused than any other school on what happens next."

Helen Davies



## Parent Power

# Testing times: the competitive world of 11-plus tutoring

It's a £7.5 billion industry that feeds on parental anxiety. *Lucy Denyer* explains how to survive

**T**ears, hair pulling and tantrums. No, not children in the playground, but their parents frantic to get a tutor for the 11-plus. It's not just the independent and selective school exams to get ready for – some state grammar schools have started charging up to £70 for children to take “familiarisation tests” to even get a place to sit the exam.

It used to be that only the super-rich had private tutors. Everyone else just went to school, came home and played with Lego. Now, in addition to the swimming lessons and the karate classes and coding circle, there's tutoring: online, in a group or in person. Parents pay varying prices depending on how desperate or how determined they are. According to a 2023 report from the Sutton Trust, 30 per cent of children aged 11 to 16 (and 46 per cent in London) have had tutoring.

“By the time I got round to thinking about additional support, it was the end of Year 5 and the tutors I contacted were fully booked,” says one Year 6 mother, whose daughter (who attends a private prep school) has sat six separate exams for 11-plus entry this term. She ended up panicking, jumping on the only hourly weekly slot available with one tutor, and then signing her daughter up for a flurry of additional workshops to do exam prep.

She is not the only one getting jittery. As one former tutor to the wealthy and worried puts it: “It's a self-perpetuating phenomenon. One mother told me she had hired a tutor because everyone else has one.”

The stakes are high. Places at selective state grammar schools are increasingly competitive. At Pate's Grammar School in Cheltenham there are about 1,900 applicants for 150 places. Applications to sit the grammar school entrance exam in Gloucestershire rose by more than 20 per cent this year: 3,130 Year 6 pupils took the exam for one of 1,050 grammar school places in the county.

In the capital things get even more frenetic: in 2023 there

were 1,666 applicants for 186 places at Tiffin School, a boys' grammar in Kingston, southwest London. At Henrietta Barnett School in north London there are about 2,000 applicants annually for 93 places.

Since the government announced VAT will be charged on private school fees, things have got even more fierce: the online tutoring platform Atom Learning saw a 39 per cent rise in the number of parents targeting a grammar school place in the past year, with half the families signed up now preparing for both grammar and independent school exams.

## History of the 11-plus

The exam was a standardised test offered until the 1970s to all primary school children for a shot at a grammar school place. In most areas it was compulsory (it still is in Buckinghamshire unless you opt out); the highest-attaining kids would get their grammar place and others would go to a secondary modern. If you were at a private prep school you would sit the Common Entrance instead, aged 12 or 13, before moving on to a senior school in the equivalent of today's Year 9.

These days the 11-plus is no longer compulsory, but it is still used as the test for grammar schools, to identify academic ability and potential, and selective

**Stress test: the 11-plus includes tests of non-verbal reasoning**

independent schools have jumped on the bandwagon with their own version of the exam. If you're moving on for Year 7 it'll be called the 11-plus; if you're changing schools at 13 it'll be called something else, such as the ISEB Common Pre-Test, used by schools such as Eton, Harrow and Winchester as a first stage of weeding out the less “able” pupils (who will still be required to sit Common Entrance in Year 8). Independent schools, and some grammars, may offer an adaptive online version of the test – still multiple choice, but one that gets harder the more answers you get right.

Exams differ slightly from school to school or county to county, so for most parents a tutor seems to be the only solution. As one parent of a Year 5 state primary pupil in London put it: “How on earth are you going to get them into somewhere good otherwise?”

Henry Faber, a co-founder of the educational mentoring specialists Oppidan Education, says: “If every child were to go to a new school in Year 9 there'd be no need for it.” But the system is what it is – and so Oppidan, like the raft of tutoring companies, offers 11-plus preparation as part of its services. Faber's company focuses on “helping kids understand how to express their strengths and weaknesses” for the inevitable interview process that comes as part of the package for places at independent schools.

“There's a difference between tutoring and preparation,” says Jane Phelps, director at the educational consultancy Norton Alexander. “Preparation is about orientation – what's going to come up. But that's different from tutoring that asks what you're learning in class and then teaches it to you again.” One Norton Alexander tutor says she had a parent asking for nine hours a week of tutoring for a child in Year 2. “I refused and did two,” she says.

Trying to prepare a child for a school they're patently not going to be suited to is also a pitfall. Faber advises parents to whittle down their options: “Anything more than five [schools] is excessive, and three is preferable.”

## How to choose a tutor and what to pay

The tutoring industry is growing fast and is profitable: one report estimated that in the academic year 2019-20 the private-tutor industry in the UK was worth £7.5 billion. But Flo Simpson, the chief operating officer at Atom Learning, warns: “There is a limit on how many fantastic tutors there are – and it's an unregulated industry.”

The advice from the Tutors' Association (TTA), a nonprofit professional membership body, is to ask for recommendations. Expect to pay from about £45 per hour depending on where in the country you're based (it will be more in London). “Tutors are not cheap things,” says Phelps, whose tutors' hourly rates

range from £60 to £150. If nobody is willing to share the details of their preferred tutor, you could try a tutoring agency, which will take a cut of the fee. It's worth checking if the agency is signed up to TTA, whose members have to be DBS-checked and have provided references.

If you don't mind tutoring being screen-based and don't want to pay a fortune, you could try online. Atom Learning is an adaptive learning platform that tailors itself to your child's needs. Sign up for one of its packages (from £40 a month for the basic English, maths and science package, rising to £70 a month for the addition of verbal and non-verbal reasoning, plus exam preparation), put in your target school or schools and it will offer stage-appropriate tuition. You can also see how your child's progress tracks against peers aiming for the same place.

If you're employing an in-person tutor, Phelps says starting at the beginning of the calendar year when the child will take the test should be sufficient, and says that “once a week for 45 minutes to an hour is quite enough”.

## Is tutoring worth it?

“I had parents who were really pushy and their kid would cry in lessons, so I told them it needed to stop,” one former tutor recalls. “The industry is built on a lot of people paying money to make themselves feel better that they've done the right thing. I felt I was just topping them up a bit. If their parents had done the same work with them they would probably do similarly well.”

Matthew Knott specialised in preparing pupils for 11-plus exams, and later wrote a book about his experiences, *A Class of Their Own*. “I hated witnessing parents putting their children under pressure at a young age,” he says “One father sat in on my lessons with his 11-year-old daughter. This made her self-conscious and scared of making mistakes.” Most schools want to filter out the overtutored anyway, Simpson points out, so be wary of overdoing it.

Tutoring doesn't have to be a horror story, however. “I believe one-to-one support can make a massive difference, and push beyond what school is capable of for a student,” Faber says. “The hysteria and toxicity is unnecessary – make it engaging and fun and memorable and it can really help a child.”

He points to the shift towards games, activities and collaborative workshops as part of the entry process at private schools, and says a good tutor will also help a child understand how to express their strengths and weaknesses, collaborate with others and build their own self-awareness – all things that will help them more broadly in life.

There are some exams, meanwhile, that lend themselves to tutoring: maths and science, for example, where tutoring can ensure rigorous knowledge of the subject. And if you're moving a child from state to private, “tutoring is essential, because it means they've covered everything they need to know before the exam, which they won't have done at school,” says one London mother of three whose children are now happily ensconced in their senior schools.

So pick wisely, don't go too early – and don't tear your hair out. Perhaps coming home from school and playing with Lego isn't so bad after all.



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# Is ChatGPT for school work a shortcut or a cheat?

The misuse of AI has been dubbed 'the homework apocalypse'. Here's what you need to know

A few weeks before he was due to sit his first GCSE exam this summer, Ryan was finally rumbled. The teenager had been using ChatGPT to write his English literature coursework, changing a few bits here and there so the teachers wouldn't get suspicious. It worked for a while – until it didn't.

"The teachers found out and I got into so much trouble," says Ryan, now 17. He was reported to the exam board and disqualified from the entire GCSE. "I got detention, wasn't allowed to go to the leavers' prom, and my mum and dad were so mad with me."

For the first time Ofqual, the body that regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England, has included a category for plagiarism using artificial intelligence (AI) in its annual malpractice report, which is due to be published later this month. These figures will also detail what sanctions offending students have faced. It's a long way from sneaking out to the lavatories to use a calculator or writing answers on a rubber. The use of AI among students has been dubbed "the



homework apocalypse" by Ethan Mollick, of the University of Pennsylvania, who is a leading voice on AI in education.

One in five UK secondary school pupils use AI for homework, rising to 31 per cent for those on free school meals, according to a survey by the charity Parentkind. Anecdotally, the use of AI appears to be

far higher – and while many use it legitimately for research and revision, some go much further.

One dad says his 15-year-old daughter had a WhatsApp group with her friends in which they were all sharing homework answers. "And my other daughter, who is 13, used Google Lens to take pictures of maths problems and get instant solutions," he says. "I was angry and talked to her about it, but part of me sort of understands. I use ChatGPT for work, to help summarise documents."

Naturally Mumsnet users have plenty to say on the subject. One writes that their son used ChatGPT to complete his A-level coursework. "The school reported it, the exam board checked it and he was disqualified from the whole A-level." Another Mumsnetter describes how her daughter was given an essay to write on reincarnation as part of religious studies homework: "All the class basically used AI to write the homework, leading to presumably a teacher spending hours marking the results of an algorithm."

Yet, as Ryan discovered, teachers can mostly spot AI work; if in doubt, many will run suspicious essays through AI checking tools such as Turnitin.

"According to my son's history teacher, perfectly placed semicolons are the best way to spot AI-generated schoolwork," one dad says. AI can also often be wrong.

Laura Gowers, a teacher and the founder of This Is Dyslexia, an assessment

and support service, regularly sees homework that has been completed using ChatGPT. "One student had a whole section of text that was clearly written using AI," she says. "It sounded robotic and not like their usual work or in the tone of the rest of the essay." It also, she adds, included a number of words often used in AI responses, such as "plethora", "leverage" and "myriad", none of which tend to trip off a 14-year-old's tongue.

While relying too heavily on AI may inhibit critical thinking – and in the worst cases aid dishonesty – when used correctly it can have an important place in helping children to learn, says Dr Shweta Singh, an AI expert at Warwick Business School. The Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ), which represents exam boards, has said AI can be used for coursework but must be referenced – or severe penalties can result.

AI can be useful for neurodivergent and dyslexic children and those with special educational needs, while some private schools have even devised their own AI tools. Sherborne School, in Dorset, has just created its own version, the Sherbot.

Ultimately it pays to remember that your child is likely to be much more tech-savvy than you. As one mum says, after believing she had made her phone a veritable Fort Knox, "I saw the first thing he searched for was: 'How do you disable parental controls on a phone?'"

Alexandra Goss

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# Parent Power

Single-sex or sporty? Exam-led, or career-focused? The 22 questions to ask to help you make the right decision.

By Hannah Swerling



**B**eyond the gloss of the prospectus and slick art-directed videos, the only way to get a real impression of any school is to put in the hard yards, up and down its corridors at an open day or, better yet, a regular day, when you can observe school life IRL.

With a daughter in Year 6 – one of 609,000 children in England who will start secondary school in September – I’ve spent much of this year traipsing through classrooms, quizzing teachers and chatting to bright-eyed pupils as I suss out our options. Some things haven’t changed (the hallways still smell of chips and Lynx) but a lot has, from measures of academic attainment to provision for special educational needs and smartphone policies.

I’ve spoken to teachers, head teachers, admissions officers and education experts to consider all the questions a parent should ask to make the best decision for their child. Of course the choice is entirely subjective, but most parents and carers agree that they want their son or daughter to thrive academically, make nice friends, discover talents and be supported, challenged and inspired.

## 1 What are your top priorities based on your child’s ability, needs and personality?

Is it academic results? Are good sporting, drama or music facilities non-negotiable? Or is provision for Send (special educational needs and disabilities) a top priority? Have a hit list of specifics to focus your inquiries.

## 2 What is the Progress 8 score?

Designed to encourage schools to focus on improving the performance of all pupils, this measure is based on students’ attainment from the end of Year 6, when the Key Stage 2 Sats in reading and maths are taken, to their eight subjects at GCSE. Scores will range from -1 to +1 – anything above zero means the school is doing OK; below zero means their pupils aren’t achieving the average GCSE grades of similar pupils nationally.

## 3 How did pupils fare in their exams during the past three years?

Schools are great at telling the stories they

want to tell about their exam results. Request detailed data for GCSE and A-level scores with a breakdown of how students have fared in individual subjects to form a more accurate picture.

## 4 What is the rapport like between teachers and children at the open day?

The way teachers and students interact can offer an insight into a school’s culture. You want teachers to be good educators and authority figures, but do they also treat the students with warmth, humour and respect?

## 5 What do the pupils say?

Ask the students giving the tour: what do you like/dislike about the school? How is bullying dealt with? What do you like doing outside of lessons? Children are refreshingly honest, so asking off-script questions can excavate some truth from the managed veneer of an open day.

## 6 How long have the teachers worked there?

Ask them. Teachers may not be as unfiltered as students, of course, but these questions could give you more of an idea about the character of the school. Staff retention can be a sign of a happy, thriving workforce – or an indicator of a stagnant faculty in need of a shake-up. Inquire about continual professional development.

## 7 What provision is there for children with special educational needs (especially those with specific but undiagnosed needs)?

“Secondary schools are required to follow the Send code of practice and should be providing ‘assess, plan, do, review’ cycles for children on the Send register,” Stacey Evans, the Send lead for the Oak Trees Multi Academy Trust on the Wirral, Merseyside, says. “Baseline assessments should be completed and shared with parents/carers on a termly basis. Parents can also ask if the school has access to

services which would be able to assess undiagnosed children for a formal diagnosis.”

## 8 Is the school preparing students for the future?

“We can equip students with adaptable skills that will enable them to thrive in the future workforce,” Zaitoon Bakhari, director of digital learning at the Achievement Through Collaboration Trust in Blackburn, says. “This includes the ability to evaluate online information critically, as well as discern credible sources from misinformation. By engaging with digital innovation in the classroom, students can develop essential competencies that will prepare them for employment and participation in society.”

## 9 Do you prefer single-sex classes or co-ed?

Studies show that girls who attend all-girl schools achieve better exam results and are also 2.6 times more likely to take further maths and more than twice as likely to take physics and computer science at A-level, compared with girls at co-ed schools.

Graeme Wright, head master of Altrincham Grammar School for Boys, sees similar benefits for boys. “In mixed schools there can be a learning gap because boys don’t always like to be seen to work hard. In the co-curricular it can create equal opportunities too: our boys love getting involved in choir, drama and orchestra. It reduces gender stereotypes.”

## 10 How close to home would you like the school to be?

For state schools the catchment area will often dictate the answer, but if you’re applying out of catchment or to independent or grammar schools, it’s worth taking the time to think about this. Some children will travel for up to two hours or more daily – and then there are before and after-school clubs.

## 11 What is the school’s policy on smartphones and how is it enforced?

This is a hot-button issue and the question that has come up on every open day I’ve attended. Schools with an effective ban were twice as likely to be rated “outstanding” by Ofsted in its former one-word rating system.

The grassroots movement Smartphone Free Childhood launched a “parent pact” earlier this year, asking parents to commit to waiting until at least the end of Year 9 to give their child a smartphone. Go to [smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk](http://smartphonefreechildhood.co.uk).

But as James Richardson, the head teacher of Pate’s Grammar School in Cheltenham, says, schools also need to stress the importance of educating young people to put those barriers in place themselves.

## 12 Where do school leavers head next?

“I get asked a lot of questions about university destinations,” Jo Ansell, head of admissions at the Perse School in Cambridge, says. “You are potentially making a decision for the next seven years, so it’s worth interrogating.”

Schools will be able to provide a list of leavers’ destinations.

## 13 What extracurricular activities does the school offer?

Gone are the days when there were few nonacademic activities beyond football

and netball. Now there are groups and societies for every interest and curiosity, from avocado appreciation and yoga to community action and philosophy. Clubs can be a great way for children to make friends and to develop their passions.

## 14 Are the sports teams only for the best pupils?

Participation in sports and hobbies during secondary school is associated with better health, education and employment outcomes later in life. Lots of schools trade on their sporting prowess; others welcome students of all abilities. Try to find out how inclusive your favoured school’s approach is.

## 15 How big are the classes?

The average class size in UK state secondary schools is 22, compared with 27 at primary level. In the independent sector the number is closer to 15.

## 16 What is the digital policy?

“Many schools are developing digital learning resources, adopting platforms such as Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams to facilitate learning, communication and resource sharing, as well as to encourage centralised access, collaborative learning and personalised learning,” Bakhari says.

## 17 When was the school’s last inspection, and what should parents look for?

As of September, Ofsted reports no longer include a single-word effectiveness grade. Instead, a “report card” system is under consultation. The ISI (Independent Schools Inspectorate) similarly offers no overall grade, rather describing the main strengths and relative weaknesses in an evaluative summary.

“Check how long ago the most recent Ofsted [or equivalent] inspection was conducted,” Dr Samuel Sims, associate professor at the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities at UCL, says. “If it’s more than three or four years ago, the inspection grades are pretty much useless for informing school choice.”

## 18 What pastoral care is on offer?

Schools should have a PSHE (personal, social, health and citizenship education) curriculum that explores mental health and ill-health. Schools should have a trained senior mental health lead and a pastoral support team. Children are best placed to flourish where support and restorative practices are in place and they feel their voice can be heard.

## 19 What are school lunches like?

Healthy pupils are more likely to achieve better educational outcomes and fare better socially and emotionally than those who are unhealthy, reports by Public Health England indicate. Parents can expect to pay about £3-£4 a meal. Some schools have a thumbprint-recognition system so that parents can track what food their child is choosing.

## 20 Are there other extra costs?

From trips to uniforms and music lessons. Over the typical five years of secondary education the cumulative cost of uniforms and sportswear for one child can reach nearly £1,000.

## 21 Does the school offer qualifications other than A-level, IB and GCSE?

Ask about vocational qualifications, T-levels (two-year courses equivalent to three A-levels), BTecs (work-related qualifications) and specialist arts and music programmes.

## 22 What about scholarships?

If you don’t ask, you don’t get.

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