

## Westminster School retains top spot

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If the Financial Times issued a trophy for topping its spring schools league table, we would surely allow this year's winner to keep it for ever.

Our current methodology was introduced when we reported the 2005-06 results. That year, and every year since, Westminster School has held the top spot.

Stephen Spurr, headmaster of the mixed private school that takes both day students and boarders, said: "Neither the pupils nor the staff think in terms of league table positions. The results come out of the love of the learning and the love of the teaching. It's not a hothouse."

Competition for second place, however, has been fraught. This year, St Paul's Girls' School, a west London private school and perennial high achiever, dropped to fifth, overtaken by – among others – St Paul's School, Wycombe Abbey, an independent girls' boarding school in Buckinghamshire, now holds second place.

Of the top 1,000 schools, 398 are independent. But, of the top 100, 80 schools are private and 19 are grammar schools. Only one is a comprehensive – and this is a partially selective one, at that.

This year's table, which only covers schools in England, has had to cope with some innovations, including the Pre-U, a qualification issued by Cambridge International Examinations.

The Pre-U certificate allows top students to show off their range: it has three grades above a "B" at A-level.

The A-level has also received a new grade, the A\*, which is one notch higher than the A. In this inaugural year, 8.1 per cent of A-levels were awarded at that level.

This allows for more differentiation among top students and the schools that teach them.

Some schools used the Pre-U this year for top students only. This gives high-achieving students more room to boost their own CVs, and their schools' league table positions.

Other students, however, use the Pre-U as a way of choosing a more interesting curriculum.

Dr Spurr says that Westminster chooses qualifications "that are going to be the most stimulating to learn and to teach. In some cases that will be A-levels, in some cases Pre-U's. Our choice is based on the intrinsic educational worth of the curriculum."

So pity the FT's league table compilers.

How does one compare a student with two Pre-U's and two A-levels against an International Baccalaureate candidate?

Michael Jacobs, an FT statistician, explains our processes [here](#).

Changes to qualifications, particularly the A\* at A-level, have contributed to a significant shift in composition at the top of the table.

Boys' results are usually distributed differently from those of their female counterparts in that they obtain more ultra-high and ultra-low marks. So boys dominate the head of the table. This year, six of the top 20 are all-girl's schools and five mixed. The top 20 schools are 70 per cent male, up from 60 last year.

This imbalance evens out lower down. Across the whole top 1,000, 52 per cent of the population is girls.

The top-ranked state school in the list is the Queen Elizabeth School, a boys' grammar school in Barnet, north London, which comes in at eighth.

The six state schools in the top 20 are among the 164 grammar schools, which select their intake on the basis of academic ability.

Indeed, of the top 50 state schools, 46 are grammars, as one would expect.

The grammar schools are supposed to exclude median and lower-ability children. But, while they do well in league tables, these schools do not appear to be engines of social mobility.

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is a commonly used indicator of poverty within school populations: children who qualify come from very low income families.

The national average FSM rate for secondary schools is 15.4 per cent.

At the FT's top 50 state schools, only 2 per cent of the children are eligible for free school meals. This is largely driven by the affluent locations of grammar schools.

The grammar school population as a whole has an FSM rate of only 2.5 per cent.

Graham Brady, a leading advocate of selective schools, says: "If there were more selective schools in deprived areas, then the number of pupils on free school meals would be considerably higher."

He continues: "It would also be a mistake to imagine that, because the location of the schools means that there are few very poor families benefiting from them, the intakes are uniformly affluent. There are many people from relatively low-income families in nearly all our grammar schools."

But the top comprehensives are little better. Those that excel in league tables are not springboards out of poverty: they are based in affluent areas.

Of the four non-grammar schools in the state top 50, only one was fully comprehensive, and it is a Roman Catholic school. These four institutions have an FSM rate of only 4.6 per cent.

Looking further down the list, the depressing pattern remains. For the top comprehensives, living close to the school is the main criterion of entry.

High house prices, rather than academic tests, weed out poor children who might attend these top schools. This is a serious challenge for the school reform plans of Michael Gove, education secretary.

Sir Peter Lampl, the chairman of the Sutton Trust, a charity that promotes social mobility, says: "Our top performing state schools effectively remain off-limits to poorer children, who are not fortunate enough to have tutoring support for the 11-plus exam, be accepted by a church school, or live in an affluent area.

"Their loss of opportunity is a loss for us all – representing one of the major obstacles to social mobility in this country."

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