

Best private secondary schools in the UK 2023

Independent high fliers in London, Guildford and Windsor offer stellar results with a galaxy of extra-curricular activities



Pupils shine at Francis Holland, Sloane Square

[Sian Griffiths](#)

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Girls' schools are on top in the [Parent Power](#) academic rankings for

independent schools. It is the first time that performance in the summer's A-levels and GCSEs has been compared with results in 2019, the last time teenagers sat traditional examinations before the pandemic.

[St Paul's Girls' School](#), where fees are £27,792 a year and 115 11-year-olds are selected from about 700 applicants, retains the No 1 spot in our league tables. Four of the top ten schools are single-sex girls' schools. The highest coeducational independent school is [Sevenoaks School](#), in Kent, in sixth place.

The dominance of schools in London and the southeast also continues. Half of the top ten independent schools are in the capital and 18 of the top 20 schools are in

London and the southeast. [King Edward VI High School for Girls](#) in Birmingham is 15th and [Cardiff Sixth Form College](#) is 16th=.

Stellar results in the independent sector come as the Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, has announced plans to strip private schools of their charitable status, which would mean losing their exemption from VAT on fees, if the party wins the next election. Labour plans to use the estimated £1.7 billion this would raise to boost spending on state schools.



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MARTIN PHELPS

St Paul's Girls' School said its success was down to "the tremendous strength of its staff and the willingness of its students to engage with new challenges and ideas". "Public exams are important as students move on to university and beyond, but we treat these as a by-product of the education we provide," a spokeswoman said. "Our focus instead is on every student as creative, curious and independent learners, capable of going well beyond the curriculum."

Under Clarissa Farr, the former high mistress, school dinners were reconfigured to address body image concerns among some pupils and the school has opened a wellbeing centre with counselling appointments available five days a week as well as a daily drop-in slot. The centre is overseen by a pastoral administrator who supervises pupils with therapeutic or medical needs “or [who] just want to take some time out from busy school routines and relax on the beanbags and sofas”.

The school was also one of the first to draw up a “gender identity protocol”, which allowed girls to be called by boys’ names if they requested it, in response to the growing social phenomenon of girls questioning their gender identity. The school has also replaced the “binary” title “head girl” with “head of house”.

Senior leaders took a central role in setting up a “west London partnership” which links 11 state and independent schools. St Paul’s Girls’ School says 11 per cent of its pupils are supported by “significant bursaries”.

In a further sign that boys-only schools are being overtaken by girls’ and mixed schools, [Eton College](#), which has educated 20 prime ministers including Boris Johnson and David Cameron, has dropped to 20th place from 11th in 2019. It is the lowest ranking for almost two decades for Eton, where fees are £46,296 a year. [Winchester College](#), where the prime minister, Rishi Sunak, was educated, has dropped to 50th (from 32nd in 2019). [Rugby School](#) (76th in 2019) has dropped out of the top 100.

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Alan Smithers, professor of education at the University of Buckingham, said: “They are very prestigious schools, many old boys will be very keen they should continue as they were but the importance society now places on diversity and inclusion makes it hard to defend the separation of the sexes.” He predicts that “Eton will be the last boys’ boarding school standing but it too will fall to the girls”.

Flying the flag for girls' academic success is [Francis Holland School](#), Sloane Square, up from 91st in 2019 to 13th and named Parent Power Independent School of the Year.

Lucy Elphinstone, the headmistress, says: "This accolade has taken us by surprise because we did not set out to raise academic results. One of our big messages is that no child is valued because of their academic results."

Elphinstone, who has led the school for the past decade, admits she was shocked when she came to London to "find out the approach of elite schools was to cram children to get to the top of league tables". She brought in lessons teaching girls to set up their own business and encouraging them not to be "little Miss Perfect". Instead she urged them to "do it scared" — to take on challenges even if they felt underprepared. The result, she says, is that in teaching girls to be unafraid of failure, confidence has risen — and exam results with it.

"Their exam results have got better — because they applied the same technique of 'have a go, put your hand up'," she says.

[Stamford School](#), [Durham High School for Girls](#), [Stamford High School](#), [Godolphin School](#) and [Norwich High School for Girls](#) are the top five independent schools that have risen through the ranks after strong results when pupils returned to the exam hall.

"Our girls-first environment, warm community spirit and focus on wellbeing lets students be themselves and supports them," says Alison Sefton, the head teacher of Norwich High School for Girls. "This ethos builds curiosity, confidence, ambition and determination in students, and through the pandemic they demonstrated impressive resilience. An already embedded digital approach to learning meant we were able to adapt as we entered lockdowns."

1 St Paul's Girls' School, Hammersmith, London

2 St Paul's School, Barnes, London

- 3 King's College School, Wimbledon, London
- 4 The Godolphin and Latymer School, Hammersmith, London
- 5 Guildford High School
- 6 Sevenoaks School
- 7 Westminster School
- 8 Tonbridge School
- 9 Brighton College
- 10 North London Collegiate School, Edgware
- 11= Wycombe Abbey, High Wycombe
- 11= City of London School
- 13 Francis Holland School, Sloane Square, London
- 14 City of London School for Girls
- 15 King Edward VI High School for Girls, Birmingham
- 16= Hampton School, Hampton, London
- 16= Cardiff Sixth Form College
- 18 Magdalen College School, Oxford
- 19 The Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School, Elstree
- 20 Eton College, Windsor

NB: Harrow do not reveal their results

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