

# Best state secondary schools in the UK 2023

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Great grammars and creative comprehensives from Cheltenham to Durham, High Wycombe to Hackney are stars of the state sector

**G**rammar schools — which select pupils at the age of 11 on the basis of entrance tests — dominate the [Parent Power](#) academic rankings for state schools. There may only be 163 such schools in England but they take up the top 20 places in our league table, the first to compare performance in this summer's A-level and GCSEs with results in 2019, the last time teenagers sat traditional examinations before the pandemic. Single-sex grammar schools perform best of all, taking 13 places in the top 20 (eight girls' schools; five boys'), while four more are single-sex to 16 and have a mixed sixth form. Ninety per cent of the schools in our top 100 state schools are 100 per cent selective.

The results come as the political debate on education heats up. The Conservatives are divided on whether to allow the creation of more grammar schools while Labour has pledged to strip private schools of their charitable status (which comes with a VAT exemption on fees) if the party wins the next general election. The move would raise an estimated £1.7 billion tax windfall to boost spending on state schools.

In 2019 the highest-ranked state school was [Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet](#) (QEB), a boys' grammar in north London. In 2022 [The Henrietta Barnett School](#) (HBS) in Hampstead, also in north London, a girls-only grammar school, has beaten QEB to the top spot.

Clare Wagner, the head teacher, says HBS's success is down to the ambition, hard work and drive of pupils, the school's high expectations and teachers' speed in switching to online lessons as soon as the government announced school closures during the pandemic.

Parents' support for their daughter's learning was also critical. "Teachers made sure the lessons were really good online [in lockdown]," she said. "Children logged in and submitted their work with support from parents. That is the magic triangle really, teachers, pupils, parents." The school sent 28 girls to Oxford and Cambridge universities this year. Like many other academically excellent schools at or near the top of our tables, HBS has set up a wellbeing centre where pupils can have yoga lessons and support to stay mentally as well as physically healthy.

It is a post-pandemic trend that is being played out across the country as high-achieving schools are looking at more ways to help pupils deal with anxiety and stress and boost resilience. One in three schools are now linked with NHS mental health support teams.

For Toby Miller, the head teacher of [St Peter's Catholic School](#) in Guildford, it was the already entrenched faith-based sense of nurture that helped the students at the school of nearly 1,200 pupils to a record set of results. These put it into the top 50, making it the nation's top-performing comprehensive and winner of the Parent Power Secondary School of the Year.

"When we returned to school in September 2021 there was no negative conversation or chat following the lockdown. The message was, you're in a good place, you've been taught well, there's no falling behind. Our attitude was, we're not going to let this [the pandemic and its effect on education] impact on you or your future. Pupils had confidence in themselves and it really paid off."

In the capital, [The Coopers' Company and Coborn School](#) in Upminster, known as the East End "Hogwarts", has jumped 131 places in the national rankings to 77th

taking it into the top 100 state secondary schools, and the top 250 state and independent secondaries.

Its rival for the title of top comprehensive school in the capital, [Mossbourne Community Academy](#), jumped from 252nd to 120th in the national rankings. It has set out to “reimagine what inner-city, nonselective education could be” since it opened its gates in 2004, and later became one of the first state schools to send more than a dozen teenagers in a single year to Oxford and Cambridge universities. Earlier this year, with a boat called No Excuses, one of its award-winning rowing teams — a third of whom are from ethnic minorities — beat several private schools including [Westminster](#) at the national school head of the river race. Another notable mention goes to [Hillcrest School and Sixth Form Centre](#) in Birmingham. The 11-16 girls’ school, with a mixed sixth form, soared 327 places in the national rankings since 2019 thanks to the success of their students as they returned to the exam hall and is now 155th. In the same city, [St Paul’s School for Girls](#), a voluntary-aided girls comprehensive in Edgbaston, jumped more than 200 places to rank 75th.

The highest-performing comprehensive in Wales, [Ysgol Bro Preseli](#), a Welsh medium school, is set in rural surroundings midway between Cardigan and Narberth, Pembrokeshire.

Rhonwen Morris, the head teacher, says: “Families have faced so many challenges over the past two years and therefore, the school made an active effort to ensure that pupils’ wellbeing extended beyond the classroom and the school campus. The school was open daily for those who struggled to engage with the lessons. The school is located in a very rural area of north Pembrokeshire where wi-fi and broadband speeds are problematic.”

Yet again the quality of Northern Irish grammar schools shines through in the Northern Ireland rankings, with seven schools in its top 50. [St Mary’s Grammar School](#) in Magherafelt, Co Londonderry, takes the top spot. However, this strong performance is not without controversy. Last month a research paper by academics

from Queen's University Belfast found that academic selection perpetuates divisions in wider society in Northern Ireland.

It is an issue gathering momentum across the union as businesses and society — especially parents — are calling for more action to fix the skills gap and to create a more aspirational, ambitious and fair post-Brexit, post-pandemic Britain. Some selective grammar schools, such as [Pate's Grammar School](#) in Cheltenham, are introducing their own outreach programmes pairing sixth-formers with primary school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who aim to sit the 11+ entrance exam.

## Top 20 comprehensive schools

- 1** Dame Alice Owen's School, Potters Bar (partially selective, 38 per cent)
- 2** St Peter's Catholic School, Guildford
- 3** St Andrew's Catholic School, Leatherhead
- 4** St Paul's School for Girls, Edgbaston, Birmingham
- 5** The Coopers' Company and Coborn School, London (partially selective, 10 per cent)
- 6** JFS, Brent
- 7** Hasmorean High School for Girls, Mill Hill
- 8** Yavneh College, Borehamwood
- 9** The London Oratory School, Fulham, London
- 10** Hockerill Anglo-European College, Bishop's Stortford (partially selective, 10 per cent)
- 11** Twyford C of E High School, Acton, London (partially selective, 10 per cent)
- 12** Camden School for Girls, London (partially selective, 7 per cent)
- 13** Parmiter's School, Watford (partially selective, 35 per cent)
- 14** Ysgol Bro Preseli, Pembrokeshire
- 15** Sandringham School, St Albans
- 16** The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, Holland Park, London
- 17** St George's School, Harpenden

**18** Lady Margaret School, Fulham, London

**19** Watford Grammar School for Girls (partially selective, 35 per cent)

**20** Mossbourne Community Academy, Hackney, London