

SCHOOL LEAGUE TABLES
WHAT THEY TELL YOU ... AND WHAT THEY DON'T

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

PUBLISHED BY THE HEADMASTERS' AND HEADMISTRESSES' CONFERENCE

2002
Revised 2004

A brief history

Over the past two decades, both independent and maintained sector schools have become much more accountable for their public exam results. New exams have been introduced.

These include:

- Key Stage 2 tests at 11 +, taken in all state primary and many independent preparatory schools;
- GCSE exams, normally taken at 16+;
- AS levels, usually taken at the end of Year 12 (Lower Sixth);
- A2 exams (known generally as A levels), taken at the end of Year 13 (Upper Sixth).

A small number of independent schools also sit Key Stage 3 tests at 14+ - but many have decided that their own end-of-year exams suit their purpose better.

Schools have been made more accountable:

- to pupils, who need good results to meet university offers;
- to parents, governors and former pupils through the publication of league tables in national papers;
- to successive governments, through the Inspection system.

Many schools started publishing detailed exam results in their prospectuses in the 1980s, and the first league tables appeared in national newspapers in the early 1990s. Whereas only a generation ago many schools published little about their results and few parents or pupils asked for information, we now have a situation where much more information is available.

This keeps schools constantly re-evaluating what they do, and gives parents the opportunity to make informed choices. There is a much higher level of interest in the data - and in what it means. However, it is not always easy to interpret this data accurately. Before looking at league tables in more detail, it is worth knowing how they are compiled.

How the exams are graded

Most league tables are currently based on GCSE (16+) and A level (18+):

- GCSEs are graded from A* to G. A-C grades are generally recognised as good passes, equivalent to former O levels;
- A Levels are graded from A to E.

(There is also an unclassified grade below the bottom grade in each exam.)

GCSE grades (and the AS levels which follow a year later) can be an important guide to university admissions tutors of a candidate's prospects at A level and beyond.

A level grades usually form the basis of the conditional offer which a university makes to a candidate. Some universities make offers based on specific subject grades, others on an overall points score.

How the league tables are drawn up

GCSE and A Level results come out in August each year. Independent schools provide information through a central information-gathering agency to newspapers - which publish them later that month in league table form. However, different newspapers draw up tables in different ways.

At A Level:

- Some newspapers use the **percentage** of a school's A level entries which achieve either **A or B grades**. This gives an indication of the number of pupils achieving the top grades, but gives no credit to pupils who work hard and for whom a C grade or below is a good result.
- Some use the **average point score per candidate** in each school, using the UCAS points tariff¹. This is a better guide, but gives no idea of the range of results achieved; a few very high or very low grades can 'skew' the outcome.
- Others look at the **average points per subject entry**, using the same points score system; this tells you the average grade achieved, but not how many subjects each candidate sat; therefore, a school which entered some candidates for only one subject each might appear to be doing well when compared with one in which most candidates enter for three or four subjects.
- Some league tables include the results of A level **General Studies** exams, whilst some do not. This is because some universities (mainly the most popular) do not recognise General Studies when considering candidates. However, many schools regard General Studies as an excellent way to broaden the curriculum.
- Some newspapers include schools regardless of how many candidates they enter, whilst other only include those with, say, 25 or more candidates.

As you can see, there is no easy measure! A school's position in the tables can vary significantly, depending on which of the above methods are used.

At GCSE:

- Some newspapers look at the **percentage** of subject entries awarded **A* or A grades**;
- Some newspapers look at the **percentage** of subject entries awarded **A* to C grades**, while some use the **percentage of candidates achieving five passes at grades A to C** (these two measures are often confused);
- Some use the **average points per entry** (where A* = 8 points, A = 7, B = 6, and so on);
- Some use the **average points score per pupil**, taking all their subjects together.

As with A-level league tables, the outcome can be very different depending on which of the above measures are used.

¹ For the purposes of entry to university, AS and A-levels are scored according to the following system:

- Each A level scores between 120 points (A grade) and 40 points (E grade); each separate AS level (i.e. not continued to A2) scores half of the above. Therefore, a student achieving three A grades at A2 and a B grade in one AS will score $3 \times 120 + 1 \times 50 = 410$ points.
- Scottish Highers and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams also have point scores awarded.

The Government also produces what it describes as **Performance Tables**, usually later in the autumn. These are expressed in a different way, and they include comparative information about such issues as absence levels and special educational needs. They are published on a county-by-county basis, but normally without giving a rank-order list of schools.

What league tables tell you ...

Depending on which measures are used, league tables can give some useful snapshots, such as:

- an indication of the average level of a school's attainment in exams. However, this takes no account of the nature of the school's intake - some schools choose to have a broader academic intake (i.e. are less selective) than others;
- a summary of the school's overall exam results in a given year;
- the school's achievement in certain public exams compared with other schools in the locality, and in the UK as a whole;
- (in some tables) a comparison between its position in one year and some previous ones.

However, most headteachers of both independent and state schools believe that they give an inaccurate and incomplete picture of educational standards.

... and what they don't

Many schools in both the independent and maintained sectors have reservations about league tables because:

- Tables give only a limited view of a school's performance. The **breadth of activities** and opportunities beyond the academic curriculum are excluded - as are such things as the quality of **pastoral care** and careers advice, **extra-curricular opportunities**, and ways in which the school enhances **personal, social and spiritual development**.
- Tables based (as current ones are) only on exam results take no account of the **value added** by good teaching; good results may in some cases result largely from a very able total intake of pupils. Tables do not compare like with like.
- League tables tend to be distorted by the extent to which a school **selects** its pupils, and by the results of a small number of pupils at the less "academic" end of the spectrum. Most schools within the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) have a sizeable number of clever pupils, but some have a much broader academic spectrum of ability than others. In many schools there are pupils contributing significantly in ways other than purely academic ones - and often there are a few who are underachieving because of family, personal or other pressures in their lives at the time when they are taking public exams.
- Exam results published in August are, in fact, only **provisional results**; as a result of clerical checks, remarks and appeals, up to as many as 10% of results will change over the subsequent months. Tables produced rapidly after provisional results are published may therefore be inaccurate and misleading.
- At GCSE, successive governments have insisted on performance tables (as opposed to newspaper league tables) measuring a school's results on an **age cohort basis** - e.g. it will only count the results of candidates born between certain dates. This penalises schools which adopt a flexible approach to the age of entry, who sit some examinations early, or who allow pupils to skip a year.
- Schools with **very high academic** standards which choose to take fewer GCSEs and to move straight through to AS and A2 level are penalised.

- Some schools choose to sit the international version of GCSEs (known as **IGCSEs**), which are not recognised in government performance tables.
- League tables encourage schools to “play safe” where the curriculum is concerned. They create a temptation to schools to:
 - adopt a narrow style of teaching (even cramming) to “teach to the test” – rigid instruction purely to achieve high exam results, rather than encouraging the development of intellectual curiosity or wider practical skills;
 - cut down the number of exams taken;
 - cut down the General Studies provision to concentrate on exam subjects;
 - reduce the extra-curricular provision in such areas as games, music and drama;
 - pressurise staff and pupils into focusing exclusively on academic matters, with pastoral and wider provision being reduced as a result.

There is even a temptation (which the great majority of schools resist) to try to manipulate results. This can be done in a number of ways, for example:

- persuading weaker candidates to drop some subjects before the exams, or even to leave a school before the end of a course;
- entering weaker pupils as private candidates rather than as school ones (and thus avoiding their results being counted in the tables).

Schools which maintain their commitment to a **broad, balanced education** can find themselves penalised by league tables.

Most importantly of all ...

... league tables do not tell you whether your child will be happy and will thrive.

We strongly suggest that, when comparing schools with each other, you:

- read the prospectus and website of each school carefully;
- visit each school at least once;
- ask the Head or other senior member of staff about some of the issues raised in this leaflet;
- try and talk to other parents who have children at the school;
- read the school’s last Inspection Report (available for most independent schools at **www.isinspect.org**).

We hope that you have found this leaflet useful.