

## Head Mistress Jacquelyn Pain talks about school league tables

I'm often asked by parents about exam league tables. Prospective parents pore over them when drawing up their shortlists, while existing parents look to them for reassurance that their school is still performing well.

But although league tables do give us some information, parents need to know how they are compiled in order to interpret them meaningfully – and understand their undoubted limitations.

Moreover, a good school is about much more than delivering A grades – and although I am proud of the exam results our girls achieve, I am even more concerned to ensure that they are rounded individuals, with a strong character and creative, flexible mind, ready to take on the challenges of a fast-changing future – and no one has yet come up with a league table to measure that.

So what do exam league tables tell us? The first thing to note is that different tables use different measures. Some are based on GCSE results; others exclude certain subjects, like general studies. Some use UCAS points per candidate or have separate tables for schools doing the International Baccalaureate.

This explains why the same school can have a wildly different position on different league tables – making it even harder for parents to judge between schools.

Here is my checklist, for making sure you are not comparing apples with pears:

- How selective is the school? If a school only takes the brightest children, it can top the league tables without much effort. A school with a wider intake, or one, like Northwood College, which does not “de-select” existing pupils between the junior and senior school, may actually be doing a better job in stretching *all* its pupils. One thing parents can do to get round this, is to ask a school about its value added score, which tells how well children have done relative to their predicted grades.
- Does the school “fit the mould” of the table correctly? For example, schools like Northwood College take the more challenging iGCSE exams in certain subjects. Ironically, if a league table is based on standard GCSE results, this can make the school drop down, because the tougher exams are not recognised by the compilers of league tables (although they are, of course, welcomed by universities).
- What subjects have the pupils taken? It is widely recognized that some exams are easier than others. Researchers at the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) at Durham University studied more than a million GCSE results over 10 years and found widespread disparities in subject difficulty, with traditional science subjects coming out as the toughest. But league tables do not recognise this. They award the same score to an A in media studies or photography, as chemistry or physics. I do not intend to demean these ‘easier’ subjects, which can be very valuable. But parents need to know if a high league table position reflects a high number of easier subjects taken.
- What is the school's policy on subject choices? Some schools allow children to take A levels only in subjects, where they are likely to get an A or a B grade. At Northwood College, we take a wider view. Of course, we encourage girls to choose subjects that they are likely to excel in. But if a girl is passionate about a particular subject and willing to work hard, we will support her to take that A level, even if we do not predict a top grade.
- What is the size of the cohort? There will always be some children who don't achieve their best on exam day. In a smaller school, the impact of one or two results on the league table position will be much higher than in a larger school. For example, in a cohort of 20 students each one counts for 5% of the school's results. In a cohort of 100 students each one counts for only 1%.

For all these reasons, the Independent Schools Council does not support school league tables, believing them to be an inadequate measure of school performance.

It's worth noting too that our national preoccupation with league tables hasn't made us perform better as a country. Both Britain and the USA have used them for many years, yet according to international comparisons, like the PISA study, our schools are well behind nations such as Australia and Finland that have not used the same approach.

I am proud of our girls' achievements in all their endeavours, and celebrate their exam success. But I am not a great fan of league tables and the message they send.

For more articles and views on league tables go to:

[www.isc.co.uk/FactsFigures\\_SchoolLeagueTables.htm](http://www.isc.co.uk/FactsFigures_SchoolLeagueTables.htm)

[www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en\\_32252351\\_32235731\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html)