

WHAT THE LEAGUE TABLES DON'T TELL YOU

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A flurry of parental interest attends the publication of the so called "league tables" of GCSE and A level results in national newspapers every August. Yet for good reason, some of the most prestigious and successful independent schools in Great Britain do not allow their public examination results to be included in league tables compiled by journalists. These academic league tables are no longer complete - or even wholly accurate.

At best, league tables are crude barometers of the educational health of a school. Just as a map, or sat nav, can suggest a route, but foretell little of the journey, so the annual league tables of GCSEs and A level statistics may chart educational outcome, but reflect nothing of the actual experience of attending a school. Whilst the league tables might indicate how many GCSEs and A levels pupils have achieved, they reveal nothing about the tone of a school, or the pace of its lessons, or the intellectual vitality within the classroom. Crucially, league tables indicate neither the atmosphere nor the values of a school. League tables do not reliably indicate the quality of teaching in a school - although some parents fail to realise this. A GCSE pass rate below 100% might seem unimpressive until you know that for a student with a chronic illness - or a sudden family bereavement - achieving a grade D was little short of a miracle.

A place at a highly achieving league table school will not give your son and daughter automatic access to the highest public examination results in the country. A Head-teacher of a highly respected and over-subscribed school in the Home Counties

emphasises at prospective Open Evenings that "parents should know what they are signing up for", when selecting a school for their son or daughter. Schools at the top of the league tables will often specify GCSE results required for transfer into the sixth form. In highly selective schools, it is not uncommon for pupils who are performing significantly less well academically than their peers to be asked to continue their education elsewhere.

"We knew this was the school for us the moment we stepped through the door". Initial instincts are usually significant - and can be far more reliable than league tables in determining whether your child will thrive in one school rather than another. It is essential that you - and your son or daughter - go to visit the schools you intend to apply for, preferably during an open day or evening. Such visits will tell you much about values and daily realities. Some schools may feel formal, others less so. Only you can decide what is right for your child. In addition to the Head-teacher and members of the teaching staff, whenever possible, ensure that you have an opportunity to ask current pupils anything that particularly concerns you. Apparently trivial queries can be significant in revealing a school's ethos.

League tables do not indicate the breadth of education available the very best twenty-first century schools. Almost every school will emphasise the importance of a plethora of extra-curricular activities, not only through sport, music and drama but via trips, visits, clubs, societies, voluntary work and charitable enterprises. Policy towards education beyond lessons will vary. In some schools, trips

during the holidays are rare; in others, school trips will only be permitted out of lesson time. Students approaching public examinations may be discouraged from significant extra-curricular activities, such as performing in school plays, although most schools will encourage the individual student to find the right balance. Opportunities to excel beyond the classroom are regarded by most teachers as a vital component in a strong and complete education. League tables can never indicate the level of pastoral care in a school. Will a form-teacher or Head of Year take the time to 'phone you if your child seems below par or unsettled? Can the Head-teacher be seen on request? Are all pupils known by name by every member by all the senior pastoral staff? How will the school respond to the inevitable peaks and troughs of adolescence? How severely are misdemeanours be dealt with? How well do older pupils interact with younger pupils?

Above all, league tables cannot provide an answer the most important question of all : whether your child will be happier in one school rather than another. A highly competitive academic environment can dent the self confidence of a reasonably bright, but not outstanding pupil. Equally, a very relaxed school atmosphere is unlikely to suit a student who lacks reasonably good self- motivation.

Therefore, the annual school league tables should probably be read with a healthy scepticism and an awareness of Professor Skinner's wry paradox: "education is what survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten" . No league table of public examination results will ever assess that!



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