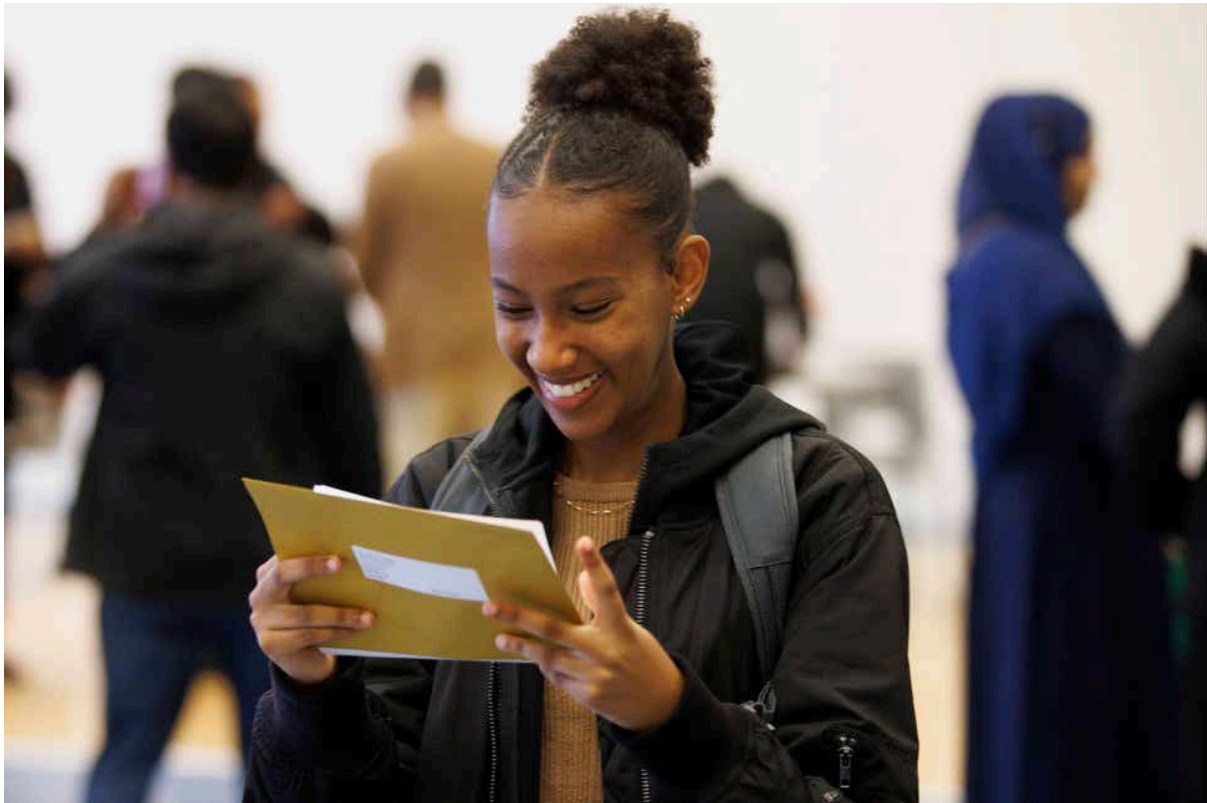


How students at one London school are winning sixth form places at Eton

Julie Henry visits a state secondary which is helping teenagers secure fully funded places at top private schools



Shiloh Huriso, from Cumberland Community School, who is now at Wellington College

Julie Henry
21 hours ago

When pupils at Cumberland Community School apply to its prestigious colleges programme, they are warned to prepare to be out of their comfort zone.

If selected to the scheme, the teenagers from east London have a chance of being awarded means-tested scholarships to attend sixth forms at leading fee-paying schools. And the lesson in discomfort starts straight away. At the first meeting of potential candidates, Simon Elliott, the CEO of the Community Schools Trust, which runs Cumberland, selects pupils without warning to talk about their academic interests in front of a room full of people.

Undaunted, a fan of neuropsychology expounds enthusiastically on the nature versus nurture debate, followed by a tentative physicist who quietly explores the potential benefits of nuclear fission. Just 15 years old and from one of the most deprived parts of London, these bright, articulate students are aiming high.

Since the programme's inception in 2019, 31 pupils have won places at a range of partner schools including Eton College and Wellington College in Berkshire; Marlborough College, Wycombe Abbey and Mount Kelly in Devon; King's College Wimbledon; University College School in Hampstead; Francis Holland School near Regent's Park; and Forest School in Essex.

It is a programme that changes lives; sending the sons and daughters of taxi drivers and cleaners, most from immigrant families, to elite public boarding and day schools on scholarships totalling nearly £1 million so far. This year's crop of applicants are told they will need to work hard, read extensively and be prepared to talk confidently about their academic interests and their lives. As important is showing they can mix with teenagers from much more privileged backgrounds. The message is hammered home that they are just as able as the young people they will encounter. No one from the group of about 40 potential candidates for the programme seems deterred.

Students who are selected are assigned a mentor from the senior leadership team of the Community Schools Trust, which also runs nearby Forest Gate School. Over the next few months they receive support with applications, entrance exams and interview preparation and get the opportunity to attend open days and specially arranged visits. A select number of dedicated and talented young people will follow in the footsteps of Shiloh Huriso, who took up a place at Wellington College sixth form in September on a Prince Albert Foundation scholarship.

"I know that these types of opportunities do not come along very often in life," said Shiloh, "and I intend to grab it with both hands. I know this gives me a much better chance of getting into Oxford or Cambridge when I attend university."

As students move on to take up place, they are inspiring the rest of the school, said Sehyr Sarfaraz, who coordinates the programme at Cumberland.

"They are changing the culture with regard to aspiration," said the maths teacher. "These young people are bright and I have no doubt they will go far in life. Going to one of these colleges will just increase their chances of success."

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