

# The happiest secondary schools, ranked by Ofsted. Where's yours?

Five years of data suggest 99% satisfaction at the leading schools — we visited two to discover their secrets



Esther Sunday Ihifah, 12, wants to be “a director, a producer, an author, a singer and a dancer” — and seems to have all she needs SANDREW MCCAREN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

[Louise Eccles](#), Education and Early Years Editor | [Matilda Davies](#), Data Journalist Sunday March 09 2025, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

At Bexley Grammar School, pupils have written positive mantras on post-it notes and hung them on to a real tree in the school canteen — a “positivitree”. One message reads: “Our beautiful BGS bubble.”

Matilda Jackson, 16, the head prefect who is hoping to study natural sciences at Cambridge, said: “From the moment you arrive at 11 years old, the teachers respect you and your ideas. They make you feel like you can achieve anything.”



Matilda Jackson at the “positivitree” JACK TAYLOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Its focus on wellbeing would have been unfamiliar when the former prime minister, Sir Edward Heath, then the local MP, opened the school in 1955, but it is increasingly something that parents are looking for.

In fact, Bexley Grammar, in southeast London, is one of the happiest schools for pupils in England and Wales, according to analysis by The Sunday Times of data from the schools regulator, Ofsted.

Official surveys shows that 99 per cent of parents agreed, or strongly agreed, that their children were happy at the school, giving it one of the happiest ratings alongside 13 others such as Diss High School, a comprehensive in Norfolk, Heartlands Academy in Birmingham and Sir Thomas Rich's School, in Gloucestershire. The national average score is 83 per cent.

Hugh Gilmore, 45, headteacher of the mixed, selective school in a diverse part of the city, said: "It's not just about exams at the end of years of study. We value education in the broader sense and the wider development of young people."



Hugh Gilmore. JACK TAYLOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

For example, the school realised its present year 10 pupils, who are aged 14 to 15, had been given a raw deal during the pandemic, missing out on the normal end-of-primary-school experience when they would have enjoyed concerts, celebrations and trips. As a result, Gilmore and several teachers took the year group on a trip to the seaside town of Torquay, Devon, to try climbing and abseiling for three days.

The Sunday Times analysed five years of [Parent View](#) data — surveys that parents fill out on Ofsted's website about their children's schools, with more than 500,000 doing so every year — to find some of the happiest in the country.



As well as enviable exam results, 67 per cent of its GCSE grades were 9 to 7 (A\* to A) last year compared to 23 per cent of all grades awarded nationally. It also offers unusual activities such as archery and cheerleading alongside cricket and football.

Ifunanya Izunna, the 18-year-old co-president of the Afro-Caribbean Society who will take his International Baccalaureate Diploma this year, credited the school's dedication to drama for helping him to secure his first role in a television show, which will air in the coming months. Ifunanya, who also starred as the prince in the school's *Snow White and the Seven Dorks* show, said: "The atmosphere here is so caring. We are in our own kind of family space."



Ifunanya Izunna, right, with fellow pupils Tadana Muhaso and Matilda Jackson. JACK TAYLOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



BEXLEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

In a testament to Bexley Grammar, 11 teachers were pupils themselves and 13 members of staff send their own children there.

Two hundred miles away in a deprived part of Leeds, West Yorkshire, the same survey suggests parents are delighted with their children's experience at the Ruth Gorse Academy, where 97 per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed their child was happy.

"It's magical here," said the principal, Ben Mallinson. "There are times when you must work in silence on really hard things in lessons, but I think great schools allow noise levels to go up and down. Students should work hard but they are still children and they should play hard too."



Ben Mallinson at Ruth Gorse Academy ANDREW MCCAREN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Bay Ferry, 15; Louie Sanford, 14; and Adebola Olateru, 15, of Bexley Grammar's cheerleading team practise in the sports hall JACK TAYLOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Esther Sunday Ihifah, 12, who is in year 8, sings NSync's *Better Place*, spontaneously, as she shows tours around the school. The school is praised in its outstanding Ofsted inspection for producing pupils who are "highly ambitious and optimistic about their future". "I would like to be a director, a producer, an author, a singer and a dancer," she said.

The Sunday Times looked at Parent View analysis between 2020 and 2025 and chose the year in which the largest number of surveys had been completed. This tended to be the year of their Ofsted inspection because schools encourage parents to complete Parent View to help inspectors before their visit.

We included schools with at least 500 places and with surveys completed by at least 100 parents in a single year. This left 1,934 state secondary schools in England and Wales in our analysis out of the total of over 4,000.

On average, parents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that their child was happy at grammars than at comprehensives (93 per cent compared to 82 per cent) and at boys' schools, rather than girls' schools or mixed.

At Ruth Gorse, there are vending machines filled with books as prizes for children who try hard at reading. On the walls are four-foot high posters of sporting stars at the school, from Irish dancing and powerlifting to tennis and basketball.

Mallinson, 41, a former PE teacher from Hull, oversees a programme that offers three core sports — karate, volleyball and rowing — in which the school also provides professional external coaching including nutritionists and strength trainers for talented players.

Ruby Gilmore, 16, a year 11 student doing her GCSEs this summer, recently won a regional rowing competition for quads and pairs and will now compete at national level. Before she started at the school, she says she had never heard of rowing, but there is now a huge poster of her in the hallway.



Ruby Gilmore  
ANDREW MCCAREN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

“The things that we get to do here, you would think you go to private school or something. It gives us opportunities we wouldn’t have had,” she said.

To encourage attendance, pupils receive points for every full week they attend, which can be spent on anything from Lego and perfume sets to Amazon vouchers and football cards.

During the pandemic, the school urged all children to return to full-time between the two lockdowns, which they believe helped them to avoid some of the worst knock-on effects on attendance. Mallinson, who became headmaster in 2020, said: “Some schools delayed the return after Covid, they were quite nervous, but we felt we needed to be brave and bring students back because this was the best place for them.”

He believes schools should be constantly planning fun events for children to look forward to “so they get Fomo [fear of missing out] if they miss a day of school”.

The school’s progress 8 score — which tracks academic progress between the end of primary and the end of secondary — was the highest in Leeds last year. “We yield strong exam results as a consequence of young people being happy at school”, said Mallinson.

The watchdog has recognised parents’ shifting focus towards a school’s ethos when choosing where their child should go for secondary. It plans to add a “wellbeing” category to its new inspection reports, which it is currently [consulting on](#), to acknowledge parents’ growing focus on happiness.

More than half of parents of secondary school pupils worry about the toll that exams are taking on them, with one in four saying their children are suffering from depression, according to Parentkind, a charity representing parents’ voices. One in ten say their teenage children have self-harmed at least once, based on a survey of 2,200 parents of secondary age children.



Pupils at Bexley Grammar School honing their cheerleading skills...JACK TAYLOR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



... and performing a science experiment BEXLEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

With this in mind, many parents are looking beyond the exam results. A recent survey by Parentkind found 96 per cent of parents said the happiness of children at a school should be included in Ofsted inspection report cards.

Jason Elsom, chief executive of Parentkind, said: “While exam results will always matter, parents across the country have made it clear that academic success should not come at the expense of their child’s wellbeing and happiness. “A child who enjoys learning and has a positive relationship with their education is far more likely to thrive in life than one who is left struggling, clutching a handful of certificates but feeling broken.”

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