



'The UK Boarding Schools Specialist'

Questions & Answers on the Importance of School Rankings and League Tables

When meeting with prospective families, the question of a school's ranking or position in a league table will inevitably come up. To help break down what it all means, we've come up with a core list of questions and answers that will shed light on what you need to be considering when choosing a school.

Question: How is an independent school ranked?

Answer: In a nutshell, a school's ranking is measured by performance data or statistical information showing how well students have done in public examinations at two key stages in their education.

1/ Measured against an average of 8 GCSE examinations taken at the end of Year 11 (Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum)

2/ Measured against an average of 3 A Level examinations taken at the completion of Year 13/Upper Sixth Form (Key Stage 5 of the National Curriculum)

Question: What's acceptable or unacceptable performance-wise?

Answer: Generally speaking senior schools are considered to be 'underperforming' if fewer than 40% of their pupils receive 5 GCSEs at grade A* - C (or 9 - 4), including English and Maths.

Question: How is the performance data presented?

Answer: Primarily through media organisations that use the data to produce rankings in the form of school league tables but the Department of Education now publishes performance tables that allows you to rank and compare schools.

Question: What are the advantages of ranking and performance tables?

Answer: They help parents ascertain how well a school is performing academically. They also help to drive up standards by increasing accountability and providing valuable information for parents.

Question: What are the disadvantages?

Answer: Comparing schools this way can be seen as too crude a measure of a school's quality, achievements and individual character. A ranking says more about the intake of a school than the teaching and learning that goes on there. It encourages a culture of competition rather than collaboration between schools. Some high-ranked schools also have a reputation of forcing students into selecting subjects that make the school look good, rather than putting the needs of the students first.



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Question: What else needs to be remembered?

Answer: That for the most part, rankings are commercial propositions and designed to help sell newspapers or drive traffic to particular websites. They are subjective and more often than not, run the risk of not providing an accurate picture of a school's overall performance.

Question: Why do as many as 50% of independent schools in the UK choose not to participate?

Answer: Because they don't want to be measured solely on the criterion of perceived success in public examinations and believe that a school should be assessed on its rounded education offerings (music, art, drama, co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes, Duke of Edinburgh Award activities, community engagement etc). Put simply, they don't subscribe to the view that a school can be assessed in the same way as, for example, a football club.

Question: What is the 'Value-Added' Bonus?

Answer: In more recent years, value-added data has become a useful addition to league tables. It is the difference between the grades a pupil is predicted to gain on joining a school and the grades that they actually achieve at GCSE and A Level. When the actual performance exceeds the predicted one, that difference represents the improvement the pupil has made and shows which schools have made a difference to their pupils' performance.

Question: So how much weighting should I give to a school's ranking?

Answer: Enough to give you an idea of a school's reputation and quality only. Determining the right match for your child is paramount and ensuring they have a happy stay will require consideration of many factors. These may include, but not be limited to the school's size, proportion of international students, quality of pastoral care on offer, how the school markets itself, the upkeep of facilities, the day-to-day environment and the reputation of the senior management team and teaching staff.

Further Consideration

If timing allows, we will always recommend that prospective parents undertake a school visit in order to observe it 'in-action'. Not only will this provide you with the opportunity to meet with key staff and see how pupils engage in a classroom setting, it will also allow you to inspect the facilities (including a Boarding House) and listen to what your gut tells you.

Once you're ready to go, remember to take a copy of AIBC Thailand's List of School Visit Questions with you too!