



North London Collegiate School, left, up 56 percentage points. Eltham College, up 43 percentage points

Private schools ‘gamed’ Covid rules to give their pupils more top A-levels

Our study of pandemic grade inflation shows that many leading independents at least doubled their clutch of A*s

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Saturday February 05 2022, 6.00pm, The Sunday Times

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Teachers at dozens of private schools at least doubled the proportion of A*s handed out to their A-level pupils last year compared with 2019, when children last sat public exams, a new analysis shows.

In 2019, 16.1 per cent of private school pupils had their A-levels graded A*. In 2021 – when teachers decided what marks to award their pupils – the proportion jumped to 39.5 per cent.

Research by The Sunday Times shows for the first time the extent of the grade inflation in individual schools. At North London Collegiate School, a girls' school in Edgware whose senior fees are more than £21,000 a year, the proportion of A* grades soared from 33.8 per cent in 2019 to 90.2 per cent last summer. The 56.4 percentage point increase is the highest recorded in the investigation.

A-Level grade boost

Many **independent** and **state schools** have recorded a dramatic increase in their top grades since they began using teacher-assessed grades, rather than exams

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School	Location	A-level A* grades (2019)	A-level A* grades (2021)
North London Collegiate School	London	33.8%	90.2%
Derby High School	Derby	6.5%	53.9%
Woldingham School	Caterham	15.8%	62.3%
Eltham College	London	29.1%	72.2%
Royal Grammar School	Guildford	35.5%	77.3%
St Swithun's School	Winchester	18.2%	59.2%
Putney High School GDST	London	27.4%	67.7%
Cardiff Sixth Form College	Cardiff	51.8%	91.2%
Loughborough High School	Loughborough	19.3%	58%
Withington Girls' School	Manchester	31.8%	70.2%

Where there has been a decrease in top grades, results are **highlighted in orange**

Click on the headings to sort the **percentage point increase columns** for A* and A*-B grades

A-level equivalences are used in some school results

Introduced in 2010, the A* grade was meant to be a mark of exceptional achievement, but it has been handed out to record numbers during the pandemic. The number of A* grades trebled – and even quadrupled – at 25 schools.

The findings have prompted calls by MPs for an inquiry into the “manipulation” of England’s exam system during the coronavirus crisis and why it was allowed to go unchecked by regulators.

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Exam boards were responsible for quality assurance last year on behalf of Ofqual, the exam regulator, but evidence was sampled from only 19 per cent of examination centres in England. This resulted in the revision of just 47 A-level grades out of 754,520 entries, meaning that just 0.0062 per cent of grades were changed.

The extent to which grades have risen is revealed as the government is set to confirm this week that teenagers will sit traditional exam papers this summer for the first time since the pandemic started. Ministers will argue that they are the fairest way of assessing performance but critics are expected to argue that some pupils have missed more lessons than others, making public exams unfair.

GCSE grade boost

Many **independent** and **state schools** have recorded a dramatic increase in their top grades since they began using teacher-assessed grades, rather than exams

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School	Location	GCSE grades 9-8 (2019)	GCSE grades 9-8 (2021)
Surbiton High School	London	41.7%	80.5%
Putney High School GDST	London	62.8%	91.2%
Northampton High School GDST	Northampton	38.7%	63.5%
New Hall School	Chelmsford	30.8%	55%
Manchester High School for Girls	Manchester	52.9%	77%
Queen Anne's, Caversham	Reading	35%	59%
Sherborne Girls	Sherborne	40.3%	64.2%
The Marist School	Ascot	27.1%	51%
Sutton High School GDST	London	45.2%	69%
St Gabriel's School	Newbury	30.5%	54%

Where there has been a decrease in top grades, results are **highlighted in orange**

Click on the headings to sort the **percentage point increase columns** for 9-8 and 9-7 grades

Tomorrow exam boards will give teenagers a broad outline of the questions they will face in June. The advance notice is an attempt to make up for the disruption that pupils have faced.

Our research looked at the grades from 2021 published on school websites by the 250 leading private and 250 state secondary schools compared with those published in [this newspaper's Parent Power rankings](#) in 2019, the last year of moderated exam results.

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The true scale of the grade inflation is likely to be even higher because many of these schools have not published their 2021 exam results in full. Only 155 of the top 250 independent secondaries and 66 of the top 250 state secondaries have published the proportion of A* grades on their websites for 2021.

Among the leading private schools that have not published detailed A-level results are Eton College, King's College School, Wimbledon, Westminster School and the Manchester Grammar School.



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While significant inflation in the proportion of A* grades was already known – accounting for 7.8 per cent of all A-level grades in 2019, rising to 19.1 per cent in 2021 across all schools (and 39.5 per cent in independents) – the scale of the increase in individual schools was not.

At Winchester College, where the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, went to school, A* grades rose from 42.3 per cent to 80.2 per cent. At St Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith, west London, which has topped the Parent Power independent school rankings for nine of the past ten years, A*s rose from 52.1 per cent to 87.5 per cent. Derby High School saw A* grades rise from 6.5 per cent to 53.9 per cent, a 47.4 percentage point rise, second only to North London Collegiate.

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At Eltham College in southeast London, A* grades rose from 29.1 per cent to 72.2 per cent, a 43.1 percentage point rise.

Robert Halfon, the Conservative chairman of the Commons education select committee, warned that the “ginormous” increases could have cost pupils at state schools, which did not inflate their results to such a degree, a place at leading universities.





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He said: “Private schools should not be baking ginormous rock cakes of grade inflation into the system and manipulating the system so that these teenagers can go to some of the top universities.

“The education secretary and the independent exams regulator Ofqual should be investigating to understand why this rise in A* A-level grades occurred at these schools and whether there was manipulation of the system. If manipulation has taken place, then far from creating a level playing field, yet another ditch has been created for state school pupils to fall into,” Halfon said.

Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, said:

“Abuses may have been in individual schools, but the buck stops in Whitehall. The education secretary must immediately order an inquiry into how these grades were awarded and how Ofqual allowed such results to go unchecked.

“With the pandemic continuing to disrupt education, and changes anticipated to this summer’s exams, we need a report and action in time to inform this year’s process. A-levels are widely respected and valued qualifications, the government must act now to secure their integrity.”

While there was also grade inflation at state schools, the scale was considerably smaller. Just two state schools make the top 50 of a combined table of private and state schools ranked by the size of the hike in the proportion of A* grades at A-level.

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Tiffin School, a boys' selective grammar in Kingston upon Thames, came 19th after raising the proportion by 35.1 percentage points from 32 per cent to 67.1 per cent, and the King David High School, a Jewish school in Manchester, has the 28th biggest increase in the proportion of A*s, up 32.5 percentage points from 18.2 per cent to 50.6 per cent.

Not all schools took advantage of teacher assessment to record huge increases in the proportions of top grades. Nineteen state secondary schools had A* increases of less than ten percentage points, led by the selective boys' grammar, Lancaster Royal Grammar School, up two percentage points, and Durham Johnston Comprehensive School, up three percentage points.

Alan Smithers, professor of education at Buckingham University, said: "Private schools have clearly gamed the system much more than their state counterparts. During the Covid crisis, schools have been free to award their own A-level grades, with only minimal checks. The private sector has evidently taken the chance to hike grades, presumably to boost their pupils' university prospects and impress parents.

"There should be a national inquiry not only into private schools' behaviour, but also the steep rise in top grades generally and the failure of Ofqual and the exam boards to ensure adequate scrutiny."

Guy Sanderson, headmaster of Eltham College, said the school's A-level success last year was "a reflection of the hard work of our bright students who prepared well for exams and assessments in difficult, regularly changing circumstances, and our highly capable and committed staff body who adapted seamlessly to a robust online teaching programme through the pandemic."

He said the school's academic results had been improving for six years, alongside a rise in the number of able children applying to the school. "These results reflect a trend that would have been shown in any form of assessment," he added.

St Paul's Girls' School said: "We are entirely satisfied that we applied the system that we were asked to employ in the most robust, fair, and accurate manner that we could and that in the words of the Ofqual [chief regulator], Simon Lebus, these results represent a 'fair and accurate assessment' of the performance of our students under the unique system that we were asked to operate."

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Winchester College declined to comment. North London Collegiate and Derby High School did not respond to a request for comment.

Ofqual said: "All school types awarded higher A-level grades last year, when teachers determined their students' grades, than they did in 2020. All heads of schools and colleges submitted a formal declaration on the accuracy and integrity of grades and processes supporting them. This year, with the return of exams, we are taking steps to return to pre-pandemic grades. With exams, all students will be assessed, and their work will be marked and graded, in the same way. There will still be a safety net for students sitting exams this summer, but overall grades will not be as high as they were last year."

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