

Staff at King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham are interested in pupils for who they are rather than for the exam results they might achieve. But it is those results that have helped win the school recognition as The Sunday Times Independent School of the Year for 2005. This year, 62% of the school's GCSE papers achieved an A* grade, while 91% were awarded grades of A* or A. Of 700 GCSE exams taken by girls at King Edward VI, only two resulted in D grades. At A-level, 98% of papers achieved A or B grades; the percentage of A grades alone was an outstanding 77%.

These results help the school rise from 40th position in our independent league table last year to fifth this, one of the sharpest ever rises at the business end of our table and good enough to lift the school to its highest Parent Power ranking. One girl at the school achieved six A grades at A-level this year, eight pupils earned five As and 21 got four As. From an upper sixth of about 80 pupils, up to 20 pupils a year win places at Oxbridge.

Sarah Evans, the school's headmistress, says parents choose King Edward VI knowing that most girls will attain top results but looking for something more.

"They know the girls are not going to spend all their time focused on examination results and that we are interested in the girls for who they are, not merely whether they will do well in exams.

We are interested in the girls for who they are, not merely whether they will do well in exams. Our staff are genuinely concerned with the development of young women. We spend our time thinking about what is best for the girls and meeting their individual needs."

The school has only 545 pupils on its roll between the ages of 11 and 18. Two or three girls apply for every place, sitting two maths papers, two English papers and a verbal reasoning test as part of the admission process. Their raw marks count, but just as importantly, the school's heads of English and maths look through applicants' papers, assessing potential through such indicators as how maths problems were approached.

The girls' school shares a 60-acre site in Edgbaston with its counterpart, King Edward VI School for Boys. Founded in 1883, the girls' school is part of the King Edward VI Foundation of seven schools - two independents and five grammars. Fees are about £2,500 a term, but generous bursary provision is available. Nearly one girl in three receives means-tested help, worth up to 100% of fees.

At lunchtime, the school feels like a coeducational institution - boys from the neighbouring school come over to take part in clubs, societies, music performances and drama. The two schools share some facilities, and there is some mixed teaching in the sixth form.

"Competition is not part of its ethos. There are no houses, academic form positions or prefects"

Pupils here do not take any of their 11 GCSEs early, but they are required to study both sciences and the humanities up to the age of 16.

"The idea that they stop history or physics before then is not right," says Miss Evans. "That's not going to produce the thinking and minds they need as adults."

Non-examined "creative living" courses are also taught, exposing pupils to electronics, photography, video technology, textiles, food, ceramics and drama. In the sixth form, girls can take courses in design, food, child development and European awareness.

There is a breakfast discussion club that tackles issues of the moment, such as the Tory leadership contest or the problems that women face at work. Girls can also choose from 50 clubs, interests and societies, including a swing band, symphony orchestra, modern dancing, cinema, radio-making and electronics. Miss Evans describes the education that King Edward VI High School for Girls offers as "on the liberal end of the spectrum". Competition is not part of its ethos. There are no houses, academic form positions or prefects.

Miss Evans says she is immensely proud of her pupils, whether they achieve grade As or not.

"I love them all to bits. I feel incredibly privileged to be here every minute of the day. It is a wonderful school and has been for generations. Being in a school like this is a wonderful experience for all of us."

The school edged out three other independent secondary schools for our top award. City of London School for Girls, which rose to second place in our rankings from 10th last year was the closest of the short listed runners-up. It would have completed a notable double for the school; the prep department is our Preparatory School of the Year. More than 97% of all A-level grades were As and Bs (83% of them As, 14% Bs), and more than 95% of GCSEs returned A* or A grades. Its second ranking is its highest ever.

Sevenoaks achieved the same distinction in finishing 12th this year, up from 18th last. Sixth-formers take the International Baccalaureate instead of A-levels and the results are "converted" into an A-level score for the purposes of our table. An A or B grade at A-level is deemed equivalent to a 5, 6 or 7 at IB; 94% of all IBs taken in summer 2005 achieved this standard. Sevenoaks is the highest ranking school with a mixed intake.

"The presence of three girls' schools among our top four this year reflects the dominance of girls' schools in this year's public examination results"

The final school on our shortlist for school of the year is Channing School, London. The girls' school rises from 25th to 10th this year off the back of excellent A-level results which saw two-thirds of all A-level presentations return A grades, and almost 96% achieve A or B grades.

The presence of three girls' schools among our top four this year reflects the dominance of girls' schools in this year's public examination results. The top seven schools are all-girls establishments. There are just two boys' schools in the top 10 this year compared to five last year, and the top 10 boys' schools in this year's table have all lost ground compared to 2004.