

LONDON SCHOOLS



Francis Holland Prep,
Chelsea



CLOCKWISE: Ravenscourt Park Prep believes in challenging all pupils, regardless of ability; Eaton House The Manor Prep helps boys believe in themselves, allowing them to achieve high

Bright & Beautiful

Is there a 'right' way to educate more academically able children? *Susie Measure* looks into the age-old debate



Ask Suzy Dixon, head of Francis Holland Preparatory School, if she divides up her pupils according to their ability to race through tricky maths problems and she is adamant. 'I won't allow streaming because I don't want that inflexibility,' she says from behind her desk in her cosy ground-floor office, just off London's King's Road, in what used to be the old Chelsea library. But she concedes that 'we do mix some groups up from year four', which means that the two-form cohort gets taught English and maths in three or four separate groups. 'The big thing for me is boosting those who haven't got the confidence, and letting the most able really fly,' she adds.

Dixon's stance on the age-old conundrum of how to teach the most able students does not fool her brightest year six pupils. 'We do sets,' says Anastasia, who is taking up an offer from St Paul's Girls' School this autumn term. 'Some of them are based on which schools you're trying for so we can do similar work,' she adds – meaning the girls aiming for the most selective secondary schools are all in the top group.

'I wish I could be straightforward and say there is one way in which we take the most able forward, but I'm glad I can't,' says Dixon. 'There really isn't one way. It very much depends on the child.' This multifaceted approach clearly pays off: as well as St Paul's, the four year six girls I met on a Monday afternoon before Easter were off to Wycombe Abbey, Godolphin and Latymer, and Francis Holland Sloane Square.

At Eaton House The Manor in Clapham, south London, Claire Fildes has been headmistress of the girls' school – which goes up to year six – since 2022. Like Dixon, she is against streaming. 'We don't set in the girls' school at all. I don't believe in putting a ceiling on learning. If schools set or stream pupils, it almost creates a label for them, and →



CLOCKWISE: Ludgrove motivates pupils by celebrating success; at Francis Holland Prep, pupils are not divided into sets by ability

they don't move away from that.' Because class sizes are small, with a maximum of 18 per form, teachers can differentiate according to ability within their day-to-day lessons, she explains. Providing 'bespoke groups' for English and maths as the 11+ looms helps to stretch and support those who need challenging, as well as those who need additional help.

Schools can't even agree what terminology to use when it comes to labelling their cleverest pupils. 'I tend to use the word "attaining" rather than "ability",' says David Wingfield, headmaster at Eaton House The Manor Prep, which takes boys aged eight to 13. 'If we talk in terms of ability, it can fix your mindset in relation to a child's innate ability,' he adds.

Simon Barber, headmaster at Ludgrove, based in leafy Wixenford in Wokingham since 1937, would agree. 'If you're in the top set, you are by definition in the "more able" category, but we don't actually label it as such because being in that group is flexible – people move from year to year. It also depends on individual application.'

At Ravenscourt Park Preparatory School in west London, which educates children aged four to 11, headmaster Carl Howes says there is a subjective element. 'The problem with the "able child" debate is if you don't know what you are measuring, then what does this word mean?' Worse, many believe, is the phrase 'gifted and talented' – a phrase Howes has 'always struggled' with. 'It's so limiting. It's as if you're saying you're either lucky or not lucky,' he adds. He prefers the term 'challenge for all', adding: 'All learners need challenging. Wherever a child is in their educational journey, there will be a sweet spot for them, which will be challenging enough to engage them but not too challenging that they go into panic mode.'

High achievers at Ravenscourt Park Prep are placed in the top sets for maths from year three and English from year four. 'We have to be

mindful of 11+ outcomes. A really selective academic school will have a more demanding paper than a school that is more inclusive on entry. We tailor our 11+ programme to the needs of the child,' says Howes. When we talk in March, year five have just had their first practice paper. They all did the same one, to give the school a baseline, Howes adds.

Barber thinks schools get the most out of bright pupils by celebrating success. Although Ludgrove no longer ranks students – 'we felt it wasn't motivational if students were coming at the bottom' – every three weeks teachers give pupils effort grades and percentage grades for each subject. 'There has to be a bit of self-motivation and a bit of competition among peers,' says Barber. 'That drives children. An environment where success is celebrated and working hard is a good thing is important.'

Schools that go up to year eight are more likely to have scholarship groups. At Eaton House The Manor boys' school, year eight is split into at least three classes: 'Two middle- to high-attaining and one high-attaining, which may contain a smaller scholarship group,' explains Wingfield. Boys in this group – which tends to have a maximum of eight pupils – will have offers from schools such as Eton, Winchester and St Paul's. 'They are taught to think in a scholarly way: to develop their own curiosity, learn for learning's sake, and have their own sense of self-direction and independence when it comes to learning and discovery.'

One recent geography lesson saw the boys watch a seminar hosted by the University of Cambridge about Donald Trump's bid to acquire Greenland. 'Certain boys were invited to watch this with the head of geography, and then have a discussion afterwards,' Wingfield says. In years five and six, high-attaining boys in maths will be moved on to logical problem-solving and taught to think mathematically in ways beyond word problems. 'We are challenging them to think more laterally in relation to number and how to engage,' he adds.

'By the time they leave us, the boys in the scholarship stream are flying,' Barber says of Ludgrove's most able year eight pupils. As well as being pushed in lessons, the school holds a number of enrichment lectures, which

often include supper with the person giving the talk. These could be on anything from provocation in art to fake news to literature, such as Samantha Harvey's Booker Prize-winning novel *Orbital*. 'They are all about getting the boys to question and think left field,' says Barber.

Ultimately, it's all about creating the right environment for the most able to flourish. 'Our aim is to create a safe place for them to be able to show that they know the answer,' says Dixon. 'For the more able, they need to feel that they are in an academic environment where it works to be academic.'

Judging by the forest of waving hands I received from a year one class in answer to a question about what they were doing – weaving – during my tour of Francis Holland Prep, there is no shortage of willingness for children to show off their learning. With the right encouragement and mental stimulation, it's easy to see that attitude leading to plenty more places at academically selective secondary schools. ■

