

Best primary schools in England 2022

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St Antony's track record sets it in a class of its own
PETER TARRY FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

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From helping to convince City airport and Tate & Lyle Sugars to give their lowest-paid staff a pay rise to raising money to help children less fortunate than themselves, pupils at St Antony's Catholic Primary School in Newham, east London, one of the UK's most deprived boroughs, have a keen sense of social justice as well as plenty of academic ambition.

"The first thing that I want is to make sure we are turning out children who are going to be socially well adjusted, very conscious of what they can do to help to make the society that we live in a better place," says Angela Moore, the head teacher of the top-performing primary school in England and *our* Primary School of the Decade.

When Sir David Amess, the MP for Southend West, was killed in October, St Antony's held an assembly to remember its former pupil. "We did a special assembly about him because we said here is someone who has lived the St Antony's message and mantra, and that is you make a difference wherever you are, and if you go into something, go into it 100 per cent to make a difference in the lives of people," Moore says. "It doesn't stop when you leave St Antony's. You carry that same passion and that same message with you on into life."



Moore took charge in 2014, when St Antony's was at the bottom of the league table in Newham, which has the highest rate of low-paid workers in London and where half of children live in households in poverty. Among many high-achieving primary schools, it is St Antony's journey from bottom to top over the past ten years that caught the eye when adjudicating on our award. It was also our Primary School of the Year two years ago.

Moore, who moved to the UK from Jamaica in 2003, set about changing the culture and ethos of the school, raising expectations through a "can do" attitude, and challenging perceptions that being on the special educational needs and disabilities (Send) register was an excuse to underachieve or that being "deprived" was naturally linked to low attainment.



"The important thing is first to build the children's self-belief. It is to make them know that it is not where they are from that matters, it is who they are," says Moore, who raised the bar for staff as well as pupils. "It wasn't something that was miraculous, it was down to real hard work and grit. I call it the ordinary magic of hard work."

St Antony's uses performing arts to build confidence through initiatives including music videos and songs for its campaign to promote the London living wage, tapping into the talents of parents including Saloum N'jie, a film director, and the rapper D Double E.

This 158-year-old school, now part of the Our Lady of Grace Academy Trust, has a track record of producing outstanding results. Based on the outcomes of the three most recent standard assessment tests (Sats), year 6 pupils attained an average scaled score of 113.7 for reading, 114.3 for maths and 116.3 for grammar, punctuation and spelling, where scoring 100 represents meeting the expected attainment level of an 11-year-old.

St Antony's — where 57 per cent of pupils speak English as an additional language, 20 per cent have special educational needs and many parents work two jobs to make ends meet — tops the table by a significant margin, the leading school among 15,000 English primaries.



Since the introduction of the new-style Sats in 2016, the strong performance of many inner-city schools has been eye-catching. The top three in our new rankings are inner-city London schools, with St Stephen's Primary School, Newham, coming second, and third place taken by Mayflower Primary School in Tower Hamlets. St Anne's Catholic Primary School, Streetly, in the West Midlands, is fourth.

Newham council boasts 14 primaries among our top 500, a figure surpassed by very few other local authorities — level with Kent and ahead of Kensington and Chelsea (12). Excellent teaching, passionate enthusiasm and unwavering commitment is a given in the highest-achieving schools, but what else are these local authorities getting right?

A shared vision and close collaborative partnerships between schools, parents and staff and the community are common features, as well as a rich variety of opportunities and experiences to help pupils to develop beyond the classroom.

"Sats are a factor of the educational journey but actually what's more important to our schools in Newham is that rich, broad and balanced curriculum," says Anita Stewart, Newham council's director of education, who took up her post in February.



She also highlights the stability provided by longstanding heads and teachers who have spent their entire careers working in the borough and understand the educational and wider needs of their pupils and their families.

Faith also seems to play a part in high achievement. Just under half of our list of the 500 leading primary schools is made up of faith schools, including more than 103 Church of England schools and 128 Roman Catholic primaries. There are also a number of Jewish primary schools.

St Antony's plans to introduce an annual community service award at the year 6 leavers' ceremony in memory of Amess, who was a devout Catholic. Choosing a winner may be hard. Pupils are very active in the wider community.

"Even though we are from a disadvantaged community, what we teach the children is that there are always people who have less than you, so count yourself as being blessed and don't be afraid to help someone else," Moore says.

The top state primary schools in England

- 1 St Antony's RC Primary School, Forest Gate, London
- 2 St Stephen's School, East Ham, London
- 3 Mayflower Primary School, London
- 4 St Anne's RC Primary School, Streetly, Sutton Coldfield
- 5= Courtland School, London
- 5= Fox Primary School, London
- 7 Lowbrook Academy, Maidenhead
- 8 Bevington Primary School, London
- 9 Hampden Gurney C of E Primary School, London
- 10 Thomas Jones Primary School, London
- 11 South Farnham School, Farnham
- 12 Colville Primary School, London
- 13= Oratory RC Primary School, London
- 13= St Barnabas and St Paul's C of E VA Primary School, Blackburn
- 15= Nicol Mere School, Wigan
- 15= St John Fisher School, Thamesmead, Erith
- 17= Evelyn Street Community Primary School, Warrington
- 17= St Joseph's RC Primary School, Willesden, London
- 19= Portswood Primary School, Southampton
- 19= Scotts Primary School, Hornchurch

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