

# THE TOP STATE PRIMARY AND

Teamwork and a focus on individual development at the best schools helps children to learn the language of success in any postcode, writes Sue Leonard

PICTURES BY PETER TARRY



THE SUNDAY TIMES SCHOOLS GUIDE 2021 INDEPENDENT PREPARATORY SCHOOL OF THE YEAR

pupils from our two leading schools for young children have converged on excellent results from very different starting points.

For 98% of those who attend Mayflower Primary school in Poplar, east London, English is not their first language – yet last year's year 6 pupils defied the odds of England's educational postcode lottery to produce the best standard assessment test (Sats) scores in our survey of 15,000 state schools for the second year running.

The Ursuline Preparatory School in Warley, Essex, may not have had to help pupils overcome the challenges of growing up in one of the country's most deprived boroughs, but its non-selective intake benefits from a commitment to teamwork and focus on individual development that shares much common ground with Mayflower, our Primary School of the Year.

The Ursuline, named Independent Preparatory School of the Year, leapt from 27th to sixth place in our prep school table with a combined Sats tally of 339. Year 6 pupils achieved a scaled score of 112 for reading, 113 for maths and 114 for grammar, punctuation and spelling in 2019, exceeding national expectations. The target is for children to score 100 by the age of 11.

Mayflower's scaled scores were 114 for reading and maths and 118 for grammar, punctuation and spelling. It achieved the same total – 346 – as Guildford High Junior School, the top-performing prep in Parent Power this year. The majority of Mayflower's 386 pupils come from ethnic minority communities. More than three-quarters are from Bangladeshi backgrounds and pupils speak a total of 16 languages including Russian, Somali and Arabic. More than half of the children live in overcrowded homes and 42% qualify for pupil premium funding for disadvantaged children. The latter figure would be higher if the borough of Tower Hamlets, where 57% of children are living in poverty, didn't already provide free school meals for all its primary schools.

Mayflower is the third East End school to be awarded our annual title in the past four years.

According to Mayflower's head teacher, Dee Bleach: "Our aim is to make learning irresistible and I think we do a pretty good job of doing that."

Inspectors rated Mayflower outstanding in 2017. "The head teacher's strong, united leadership encourages staff and pupils alike to excel," said a glowing Ofsted report, adding that "steadfast determination to make a difference to pupils' life chances is the bedrock of the school's excellence".

Bleach, who has 34 years' teaching experience, says: "We have high expectations of ourselves and our pupils and do our very best to ensure they all have an excellent education." She joined Mayflower as deputy head in 2006, taking charge two years later.

"Like all inner-city schools, we have

high levels of mobility, so we become expert at welcoming new arrivals and giving them the support they need," she says. We said goodbye to a child last week who had arrived speaking no English in year 1 and left us in year 4, a kind, confident and articulate child, ready for her new school."

The coronavirus pandemic hit Mayflower's attendance rate hard. The school had the highest figures in the borough in 2019 but they slipped to 61% before his first lockdown in March. Attendance has now recovered to 95.8%.

The school sent home learning packs as many families lacked reliable internet access at home or enough devices to go around. Food parcels were also orga-

nised for Mayflower pupils and their parents. "[For] many of our families, the work they had in restaurants and taxi driving so all that disappeared... I don't think many of those were on our furlough schemes," says Bleach.

"We just focus on every child," says Wilson. "I know it sounds like a cliché but we actually do. The staff are brilliant at differentiating work so the children get success – and I don't need to tell anybody that success breeds success."

Inspectors rated pupils' academic and other achievements as excellent last year. "Pupils of all abilities, and in all year groups, make good progress at all stages, due to the broad curriculum and planning that is based on a detailed understanding of the needs of individual

pupils," said the Independent Schools Inspectorate report. Wilson was a parent and trustee at Ursuline in the 1990s when it was threatened with closure because of dwindling recruitment in the Ursuline religious order that had founded the girls' school 60 years earlier had led to staff shortages.

She was persuaded to step in, taking a 50% pay cut from her job as head of a state secondary school in Dagenham, east London, to take over in 1994, turning the Ursuline co-educational to create a community atmosphere.

The roll had fallen from 95 to 54 pupils because of uncertainty about the school's future. Within 18 months, as word of mouth spread, the school reached capac-

ity with 180 pupils – and has remained full. Most parents register their children for a nursery place, the main entry point, before they are born. Priority is given to siblings and practising Catholics, although the Ursuline also accepts children from all faiths and none.

By no means all the children come from well-off backgrounds, says Wilson. Some parents make sacrifices or take on extra work to pay full-time fees which range from £3,935 to £4,145 per term.

"Everybody presumes that because you are at private school that you have got a lot of money," says Wilson. "You're a lot that are affluent and they have big houses but quite a lot of them haven't – but they prioritise their finances, and for them education is more important than a summer holiday in wherever."

The Ursuline's boys and girls gain sought-after places at independent secondaries or grammars including Cheltenham Ladies' College, Benenden, Reigate Grammar and the City of London schools.

The teachers run 42 after-school clubs ranging from choir and cricket to wellbeing, gardening and chess, at no extra cost to parents.

Wilson, who was appointed an MBE in 2016 for services to education and takes a class for two days a week, says of her school: "I love what it stands for. I love the ethos. I love all of it. We are a happy, hard-working family."

Energetic Mayflower staff are always on the lookout for new ideas that might help their pupils. Classes are named after inspiring artists and writers and the school is experimenting with flexible seating, recently buying standing desks and rocking chairs for its classrooms.

Teachers use a responsive teaching approach, keeping the effectiveness of lessons under review. They have introduced programmes teaching commu-

nication skills including greetings, apologies and how to interrupt politely, and the school has taken part in a research project with University College London on a project to boost children's memory.

The school's high attainment is no overnight success, says deputy head teacher Adam Stock. "The last two years have been exceptional [but] it's not just about the year 6 team achieving these amazing results, it is about the whole team and the journey starting from the early years. It's not just microwaving children in year 6 to get good results."

Everyone learns from each other. Pupils swap study partners every one or two weeks, depending on age, and learn across year groups in non-Covid times. Mayflower's pioneering methods have attracted visitors from New York, Hong Kong and Holland.

"It is a team effort," says Bleach, who takes a reading group every day. "Our office manager, Amena [Begum], said recently: 'Teamwork makes the dream work.' When we all pull together we can achieve extraordinary things."

# INDEPENDENT PREP SCHOOLS

## THE TOP 250 STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

Schools are ranked by the aggregated average scaled scores achieved by children in reading, grammar and maths from Sats taken in 2019. Where scores are tied, the number of pupils achieving these results is used as a separator

Table with 10 columns: RANK 2019, RANK 2018, TOWN, READING, GRAMMAR, MATHS, AGG SCORE, PUPILS, SITTING TESTS, RANK 2019, RANK 2018, TOWN, READING, GRAMMAR, MATHS, AGG SCORE, PUPILS, SITTING TESTS. Lists top 250 state primary schools in England.



One-to-one attention helps children to get off on the right foot at the Ursuline Preparatory School, left and middle, and Mayflower, our Primary School of the Year, where results in the past two years have been exceptional

It is a team effort. When we all pull together we can achieve extraordinary things

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