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School database lets parents compare GCSE results by subject

Guide created by Guardian and Open Public Services Network uses four years of data from secondary schools in England

Parents, teachers and school governors will be able to compare the GCSE results of secondary schools by subject for the first time from Wednesday, using a database partly created by the Guardian. The Guardian GCSE schools guide, developed in partnership with the Open Public Services Network (OPSN), goes live on Wednesday morning using results data from every mainstream secondary school across England over a four-year period.

The guide also uses an innovative measure called "school impact", which shows how successful certain schools are at improving their pupils' performance compared to schools with similar intakes. The value-added measure merges pupils' previous attainment with social factors such as gender, the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and the number speaking English as an additional language, as well as the proportion of pupils with special educational needs.

Using the school impact measure, schools such as Parkwood academy in Sheffield and Ifield community college in Crawley – which are well above the national average in the number of pupils with special needs or pupils eligible for free school meals – are revealed as having consistently better-than-might-be-expected results.

Meanwhile, using a combination of the school impact and exam results, the Guardian guide can highlight a select group of nine state schools in England that combine high scores and sustained above-average improvement in the performance of their pupils. Their ranks include the Thomas Telford school in Telford and the Ashmole academy in East Barnet, in north London.

Michael Gove, the education secretary, said the new guide would be a valuable tool for parents at a time when, in some parts of the country, there is increasing pressure to exercise choice over which secondary school children attend.

"More transparency is vital if we are to raise standards," Gove said. "It is right that the hard work of teachers and pupils in schools which do well can be shown and celebrated – while schools which let pupils down, or are coasting, need to be exposed.

"Parents should have the fullest picture possible of what a school's strengths and weaknesses are. Making this data more easily accessible is a great piece of public service journalism by the Guardian."

Under the coalition government, the public has been given greater access to all key stage exams and GCSE results. The guide uses this data and also pupil and school characteristics from the national pupil database, Ofsted inspection reports and other publicly held information.

The school impact measure – known as contextual value-added – was developed by the Fisher Family Trust, and is intended to be a more sophisticated calculation than the value-added measures introduced by the previous Labour government in 2003.

"The data gives parents a clearer understanding of the differences between schools in terms of what they teach and the standards achieved, to help them understand the educational opportunities open to their children," said Roger Taylor, chair of the OPSN, an independent not-for-profit organisation, which seeks to monitor and measure government services in ways that engage the public.

"Our objective was to present publicly available data in a way that is easy to understand and directly address the questions that parents and pupils have. We will be building on this work in future by expanding the range of information that we can make available and updating it each year," Taylor said.

School-level data is from 2008 and 2012 – the most recent available to analyse. It allows parents to chart a school's progress compared with national performance. Results data from August 2013 will be added when it is released by the DfE nationally, normally in the following January.

The guide enables parents to select multiple schools and compare their achievements by subject, as well as by the proportion of students awarded five A*-C grades, including English and maths, using the government's benchmark. It also shows the trend in each school's exam performance, both overall and in individual subjects, over the last four years, as well as the proportion of each school's GCSE entrants awarded A*-C and A*-A grades.

Simon Lebus, the chief executive of Cambridge Assessment exam board, who chaired the OPSN reference group that advised on the guide's creation, said the aim was to provide a "three-dimensional" tool that was not exam-based. "We wanted to get away from the existing sets of data and existing formats in which they were published – to provide a platform that was more three-dimensional and could give a more holistic feel for parents or teachers or governors when they were trying to look at a school and get a feel for it," said Lebus.

"We thought the information was in too many different places. A lot of it was used for different purposes. For example, exam measures are primarily used for accountability by the government looking at the performance of schools and measuring. But that sort of information presented for those purposes isn't necessarily going to be helpful for a parent trying to work out whether it's going to be a good school for their kids."

The need for easily accessible information has become more urgent, Lebus said, because of the increase in variety of schools with the advent of academies and free schools. "The schools themselves are becoming more diverse and that makes the need for common information platforms much more pressing, so that people can make sensible and informed comparisons and choices," Lebus said.

The GCSE schools guide builds on the Guardian's previous experience in developing the Guardian university guide, which ranks university departments by individual subject and has become a valuable resource for students going on to higher education.

Alongside the Guardian, the OPSN's work is supported by Cambridge Assessments, which manages the OCR and Cambridge International Examinations boards which offer GCSE and international GCSE exams, and RM Data Solutions.