

SIXTH FORM COLLEGE OF THE YEAR

# Sixth Form College of the Year: London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham

This sixth form college refuses to allow disadvantage to determine expectations, writes Senay Boztas



The selective free school was set up in September 2017 as a partnership between Highgate School and business sponsor Tottenham Hotspur Football Club  
PETER TARRY/LONDON ACADEMY OF EXCELLENCE

Senay Boztas | Sunday November 29 2020, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

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**R**unning from leafy Highgate to the struggling eastern estates of Tottenham north London, two headmasters have put in the miles to bring their schools closer together.

Jan Balon, head teacher of London Academy of Excellence (LAE) Tottenham, and Adam Pettitt, who leads the independent Highgate School, completed a sponsored run between their schools this month to raise money for 200 Tottenham families deeply impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

The families affected have talented children who, in one of the most deprived wards in the country, are outperforming all stereotypes to achieve extraordinary results – winning LAE Tottenham the title of The Sunday Times Sixth Form College of the Year.



The selective free school was set up in September 2017 as a partnership between Highgate School, The Sunday Times London Independent Secondary School of the Decade, and business sponsor Tottenham Hotspur Football Club with a mission to drive academic success and change perceptions – both for its own student community and the wider area.

“That run reflects really nicely the relationship between the two schools,” says Balon, who ran a half marathon while Pettitt took on a full marathon distance in a circuitous route between the two schools. They were joined by 30 Highgate staff members, running alongside or cycling routes up to 60km.

“There have been so many challenges for our families, who need support with food, rental arrears and utility bills. We raised £100,000 immediately after the lockdown in March and made donations of over £15,000 to support the community more widely.

“Now, 45% of Tottenham families have no one in work – [they are] either on furlough or unemployed – and we came up with the marathon idea, which raised another £75,000 for our hardship funds. Symbolically, it also shows how the support from Highgate is part of what we are as a school.”

LAE Tottenham has just under 500 students, 40% of whose families have a household income of less than £22,000, and who come from a huge range of ethnic backgrounds.

According to the school, in 2017, only 1% of students from the east of Haringey were likely to achieve a place at a Russell Group university, compared with 18% from the west of the borough. It set out to break the mould. Among its second group of school-leavers this summer, 80% of A-level grades achieved by the 162-student leaver cohort were A\*-B (46% of them at A\*/A), with two-thirds of the group heading to a Russell Group university (and 11 to Oxbridge).

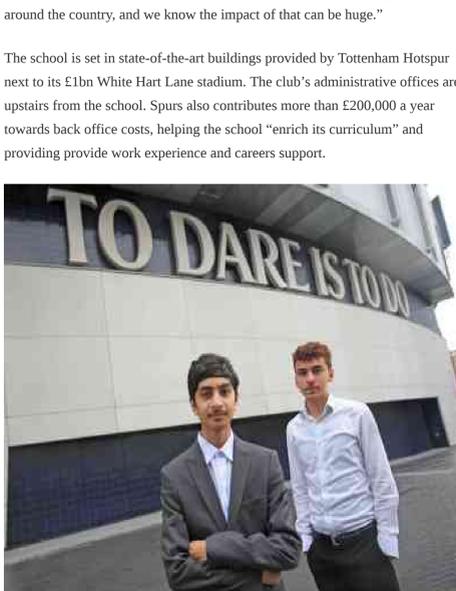
The school debuts in 15th place in our Sixth Form College ranking based on the results achieved by its first leaver cohort in 2019, when just under 20% of the students achieved AAB or better in A-levels, incorporated at least two facilitating subjects (those that are considered more intensive).

“Haringey is the most divided borough in London: the wards around Highgate are some of the most advantaged in the country and Northumberland Park ward, where we are, is in the bottom 2% of most deprived wards in the country,” says Balon.

“There’s a six-year difference in male life expectancy across the borough. The differences couldn’t be more stark, but what we aim to show is that there is so much potential among young people in this area and it is a question of opportunity.

“There’s an element of innovation in the structure of the school but it is simply providing the kind of education that is available for many advantaged families around the country, and we know the impact of that can be huge.”

The school is set in state-of-the-art buildings provided by Tottenham Hotspur next to its £1bn White Hart Lane stadium. The club’s administrative offices are upstairs from the school. Spurs also contributes more than £200,000 a year towards back office costs, helping the school “enrich its curriculum” and providing provide work experience and careers support.



The school neighbours Tottenham Hotspur’s new £1bn stadium  
PETER TARRY/LONDON ACADEMY OF EXCELLENCE

Highgate School provides significant educational assistance, including the equivalent of five full-time teaching staff, while eight other independent school partners including Alleyn’s, Haberdashers’ Aske’s Boys’ and Harrow also pitch in. The institution is based on the successful model of LAE Stratford, which opened in September 2012 and won our Sixth Form College of the Year title in 2015.

The Tottenham school has two important goals: academic rigour and a determination not to let socioeconomic factors determine expectations.

Students in year 12 study four A-levels (although they can drop one in the following year). The curriculum focuses on “facilitating” – generally harder – A-level subjects and there is a huge range of extracurricular activities which challenge students to take risks and develop independence. In parallel, the school does all it can to support students as they branch out.

For Farouk Suleiman-Fatai, 17, who moved to the UK from Nigeria at the age of eight, the school has offered a pathway towards studying economics and management at university, thanks to his predicted A\*AA grades. “I come from a state school in the area, not really known for its academic record,” he says.

“It’s a change in environment, everyone’s striving to do better things in their lives, and the working environment really pushes you to get with the vibe.”

He was surprised by the levels of encouragement and help, especially during the pandemic. “It’s a relatively small sixth form, and the teachers do care about the students,” he adds. “Before the lockdown, the school gave out Chromebooks to students who had problems with computers or access to technology at home, so that was really helpful. Some students were allowed to come in, under Covid guidance, to also study here. I think everyone could keep up.”

Dorea Nengese, 17, thinks she has started a new trend in her family. She is determined to head to university to study politics and sociology before her two older brothers. “I’m from Walthamstow, a neighbouring constituency, and went to a standard comprehensive school but I was definitely intentional about coming to LAE Tottenham because I didn’t want to go to a college or something that wasn’t going to get me where I needed to go,” she says.

“My family definitely recognises it’s not a typical post-16 school, especially compared to some of my cousins’. At first, they thought it was a bit uppity or stylish but once they saw how much it requires of you, they understood it might change my home life or how much I contribute to the household.”

Nengese, who speaks French and her parents’ Congolese language, Lingala, is determined to go into international politics. She appreciates a “chilled” and sociable atmosphere at LAE Tottenham, where “there’s a balance of being a teenager and knowing where you are trying to go.”

Balon believes that many of the barriers for his students are only a matter of perception. He sees clubs, outreach work with local schools and sports activities as vital for building self-esteem. “For the students we serve, the biggest barrier is not often academic: it’s their expectation of themselves,” he says.

“Events of the last few months have shown there are so many signs society gives them that they aren’t the people who should be doing the jobs they might hope to do. Just giving them as many opportunities as possible through clubs, sport, community projects, to feel uncomfortable in a really safe, comfortable environment is a huge thing.”

Paul Spraggs, mental health and emotional wellbeing lead, has been a full-time staff member from the start, managing a counselling team of five and links with local support services. He believes his team is a significant factor in keeping struggling students from dropping out and equipping them to deal with stress and other challenges.

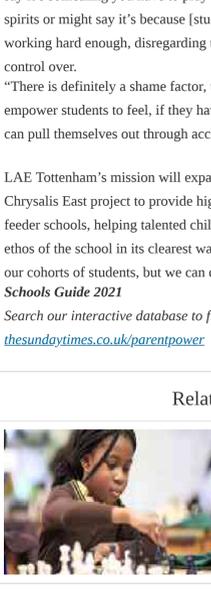
“There will literally be some backgrounds where they say mental health doesn’t exist,” Spraggs says. “Some families from religious backgrounds will say it’s something you have to pray away, something that’s caused by evil spirits or might say it’s because [students] aren’t getting enough sleep or working hard enough, disregarding the fact that it’s something we have no control over.

“There is definitely a shame factor, too. The main thing that we do is to empower students to feel, if they have been placed in a position as victim, they can pull themselves out through accessing support.”

LAE Tottenham’s mission will expand even further next year through the Chrysalis East project to provide high-standard teaching to four Tottenham feeder schools, helping talented children with their GCSEs. “This expresses the ethos of the school in its clearest way,” says Balon. “We are hugely proud of our cohorts of students, but we can do more.”

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