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# High-quality teaching at heart of school's success

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ONE of the UK's leading private schools has put its remarkable success down to homegrown Welsh teaching talent after landing near-perfect A-level results.

Early indications suggest Cardiff Sixth Form College, in the Roath area of the city, again came top in the UK A-level results table ahead of Queen Elizabeth's School, in North London, with an overall A\*-B pass rate of 99.28%.

In addition, 58% of all grades awarded at the college were A\* and 95% were A\*-A, placing them at the summit of the A-level league table for the fifth year in succession.

All 158 candidates had at least one A, 132 had at least one A\* and 100 students had two A\*s.

College director Yasmin Sarwar said she was delighted with the "continued remarkable success of the college" and highlighted the impact of high-quality teaching on pupil performance.

She said: "Most of our teachers are local teachers from Wales who have come to us directly from the state sector. They are outstanding in what they do and do not require any re-training to deliver the best results in the country, on a par with the Asian countries which top the 'Pisa' tables.

"The teachers have, however, adapted their teaching somewhat to the requirements of their students who are focused first and foremost on examination success."

Mrs Sarwar said creating a "climate of expectation" within the college was key to its success.

"Our formula is simple; promote a teacher-led, curriculum-focused approach, with above-average contact teaching time," she said.

"We have created such a strong culture of expectation among students and teachers that everyone is aiming for 100% in every exam. One student requested to re-take a unit in which he scored 98% because he was



► Students at Cardiff Sixth Form College celebrate receiving the A-level results which helped put them at the top of the UK table for the fifth year in a row

hoping for 100% in every unit."

Cardiff Sixth Form College, which charges fees of £15,000 a year, takes students from more than 40 countries.

Mrs Sarwar said the college was "extremely proud" of its students, with 21 holding offers for Oxbridge and 54 set to embark on careers in medicine.

She added: "We are academically selective, but with up to 600 students applying for 150 places each year,

selection is far from being an exact science.

"Our students stem from over 40 countries, all having come through different education systems, so there is only so much we can do to differentiate between them.

"The result is a fairly broad distribution of abilities that you would find in any selective school. The difference is, once they are with us, we consider them all to be A\* students from the outset and we treat them as such."

Mrs Sarwar said the role of parents could not be underestimated and their significant financial investment gave students "a strong sense of responsibility to make the best use of this opportunity."

She added: "We have heard a lot about the 'tiger mums' of Asia, who are often much criticised and derided. We pride ourselves at Cardiff Sixth Form College in developing independence in our students, and nobody wants a 'pushy parent' mak-

ing decisions for them in the sixth-form.

"However, I do sometimes wonder whether local students might do better if there were a few more 'British lioness mums' taking a stronger interest in their children's education."

Elsewhere in Cardiff, a pupil who fled Iraq after her uncle was murdered by Isis picked up three A-levels despite not speaking a word of English before moving to South Wales three years ago.

Asala Al-Shahwani, 18, who lives in Adamsdown with her mother, brother and sister, joined the city's Cathays High School in March 2012, halfway through the GCSE course, and had to learn English from scratch.

She said: "It was so different for me. Everything was new - new teachers and new pupils. When I started school I couldn't speak or understand any English.

"I would sit in class and try to follow. It was hard at the beginning but then I started building relationships with people."

But just three years later, industrious Asala defeated all the odds and passed A-levels in maths, biology and chemistry.

She had already gained an A\* grade in A-level Arabic, which she did when she was in Year 11 - two years before the usual A-level age - and achieved an A\*, six Bs and four Cs at GCSE level that same year.

Last Thursday was another proud moment for her and mum Sajedah, who had accompanied her daughter to collect her A-level results.

Sajedah, 48, who worked as a lawyer in Iraq, said: "In Iraq she was the most clever person in her school. My daughter is such a good girl and I am so, so proud of her."

Deputy head teacher Tracey Stephens, who will take over at Cathays High next month following the retirement of Rodney Phillips, said: "Asala has done tremendously well. She's a lovely girl and a good public speaker."