

Asylum-seekers soar at school in shadow of Heathrow Airport

Its pupils speak 66 languages between them, yet its exam record is above the national average. Richard Garner on what it can teach us

The names of illustrious independent and state grammar schools may always appear near the top of exam league tables, but it is schools such as Uxbridge High in west London that are really top of the class.

The 1,200-pupil school, almost in the shadow of Heathrow Airport, is bucking this year's most worrying trend – that disadvantaged pupils do far worse in exams. Its proximity to London's main airport means that it has taken in many asylum-seeking children. Its pupils speak 66 different languages between them and many have just a smattering or less of English when they start schooling in the UK.

Seven years ago, just 17 per cent of its pupils achieved the benchmark of five A* to C grade passes at GCSE, well below the Government's "floor" target of 35

per cent. That figure has now more than tripled to 59 per cent – higher than the national average.

According to principal Peter Lang, who has been at the school for 10 years, the secret behind this success is the respect shown for each pupil's heritage.

"We celebrate their individual cultures," he said. "For instance, we celebrate St George's Day – the chef will make them roast beef for dinner that day. We celebrate Chinese New Year, too, Eid and Diwali. It's not a nationalistic thing – and not to the detriment of other cultural backgrounds. You mustn't

"We celebrate their individual cultures... it's not a nationalistic thing... you mustn't marginalise people in these times"

marginalise people in these times."

The school is very proud of its record in improving the performance of its white working-class pupils who, nationally, often fare worse than other groups. Pupils from Somali backgrounds, again an ethnic group which often does badly in national statistics, also do well. Disadvantaged pupils at the school fare almost as well as their better-off classmates, with 53 per cent obtaining five A* to C grade passes, including maths and English, compared to 63 per cent. Nationally, the difference is much wider, 34 per cent compared with 58 per cent.

The school has also created a "house" system, similar to that which is so beloved of independent schools, because it believes it can instill a sense of pride in students. But they are hous-



Peter Lang, headteacher of Uxbridge High School, Middlesex, with some of his pupils
TERI PENGLLEY

es with a difference. "We've named the houses after leading universities – Cambridge, Harvard, Brunel – in an attempt to increase their aspiration to go on to higher education," Mr Lang said.

It appears to be working – the sixth-form has increased in size from just 80 pupils to 250 in recent years. Uxbridge

