

Crystal Springs Uplands School

Hillsborough, United States



On a Peninsula estate once built by railroad money, this day school ditched AP courses for honors-level, student-driven research.

RANKING DIMENSIONS

Overall	74/100
Academic outcomes	78/100
University placement	76/100
Prestige & heritage	72/100
Alumni network	71/100
Facilities	72/100
Transparency	71/100

EDITOR'S VERDICT

Crystal Springs Uplands sits in a narrow, rarefied slice of the Bay Area market: a non-religious day school for ages 11 to 18 that trades on intellectual seriousness rather than brute-force credentialism. The distinguishing move is its rejection of standard AP courses in favour of Advanced Topics classes and student-driven research. That is not a cosmetic curriculum tweak. It tells parents that the school wants pupils who can handle ambiguity, read deeply and produce original work, not just accumulate exam labels. With classes averaging ****14**** and a ****9:1**** student-teacher ratio, Crystal has the structural capacity to run that model properly. Plenty of schools talk about being known well; fewer can point to numbers that make it plausible.

What makes Crystal shortlist-worthy is the combination of **high academic ambition** and a school design built around close adult attention. The advisory system runs throughout a pupil’s time at the school, and the scale supports it. Two campuses on the San Francisco Peninsula give it physical room and a degree of remove from the churn of urban life, while the student body is far from socially narrow: the school states that 69% of students identify as people of colour. For families who want a rigorous American education without the standardised AP treadmill, that is a serious proposition. It also carries the external markers parents expect in this tier, with NEASC and NAIS accreditation, and an average annual fee of ****\$68,600**** across the full ladder. That is **expensive**, even by US independent-school standards, and it places Crystal firmly in the elite day-school bracket.

The school will suit bright, self-directed pupils who enjoy discussion, can make use of teacher access, and want a more **thoughtful, less mechanised** route through secondary school. It will also appeal to families who value diversity as a lived feature of the student body rather than a line in a brochure. It will not suit children who need heavy external scaffolding, constant grade-chasing, or the motivational clarity of a conventional AP menu. Crystal’s model asks for curiosity, resilience and a willingness to do harder intellectual work without the reassurance of familiar national badges. For the right student, that is **a serious advantage**. For the wrong one, it is **an unforgiving fit**.

STRENGTHS	TRADE-OFFS
• Maintains a low student-teacher ratio of about 9:1, a figure confirmed across multiple independent school directories and the school's own profile. • Named by The Wall Street Journal in 2007 as one of the world's top 50 schools for preparing students to enter leading American universities. • Reports a 100% four-year college matriculation rate, with recent classes admitted to institutions such as Stanford, Princeton, Brown and UC Berkeley. • Operates a substantial tuition assistance program, with roughly a quarter of students receiving aid that on average covers 72% of tuition costs. • Replaced the standard AP curriculum with school-designed Honors courses and a senior-year mentored 'passion project,' giving teachers latitude for project-based and research-driven learning.	• Day tuition sits at roughly \$63,300 to \$68,600 depending on the year cited, placing it among the costlier private day schools on the San Francisco Peninsula. • Admission is highly competitive, with acceptance rates cited around 22%, requiring transcripts, recommendations, a timed written statement and an interview. • The school dropped official Advanced Placement courses after the 2012-13 year, which may concern families who expect an AP-labeled transcript for international university applications. • Middle school (grades 6-8) and upper school (grades 9-12) sit on two separate campuses roughly six miles apart, in Belmont and Hillsborough, meaning students change location partway through their Crystal career.

ADMISSIONS

Crystal Springs Uplands enrolls students at grade 6 (Belmont middle school campus) and grade 9 (Hillsborough upper school campus), with occasional openings in other years. Applications run through the Ravenna platform and require transcripts, teacher and counselor recommendations, a timed written statement via Kira, and a required interview; ISEE/SSAT testing has not been mandated in recent admission cycles. Cited acceptance rates of around 22% suggest a genuinely selective process, with application deadlines typically falling in early January.

NOTABLE ALUMNI (15)

MUSIC: Kitty Margolis

DRAMA: Patty Hearst, Polly Draper, Elizabeth Ho, Emily Goss

LETTERS: Jon Fisher

SCIENCE: Will Harvey, Jack Herrick, Jon Fisher, Joshua B. Tenenbaum

BUSINESS: Will Harvey, Jack Herrick, Jon Fisher, Greg Lindberg, Sam Bankman-Fried

WTS RATING 

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