

FINDING THE RIGHT SCHOOL



Focusing on the important aspects of school life will help you make the right choice for your child, says **Richard Queripel**, Head of North London Collegiate Junior School

Choosing the right school for your child can seem like a daunting task. Faced with a myriad of websites and social-media feeds showcasing schools' successes, parents can be left wondering where to start. But there are some key factors to consider when beginning the search that will help you to narrow down the field, refine a shortlist and ultimately find the school that is right for your child. Some of the first decisions to make are about the type of setting: single sex or co-educational, day or boarding. You may well start with a strong sense of which is best for your child, but, if you're not sure, talk to parents with children in different types of schools and ask schools directly to explain the merits of their setting. One of the questions I enjoy answering most is: Why should I send my daughter to a single-sex school? School leaders are passionate about their schools and will be more than happy to discuss the suitability of their setting for your child. ►



Some children benefit more from a single-sex school environment

AS WELL AS THE HEADTEACHER'S CHEERY WELCOME, *look at the achievements the school highlights on its news page* AND HOW IT DESCRIBES ITS CURRICULUM

Independent schools have a variety of intake points. If you're considering primary education, some schools have nurseries, while others start at reception (four+ entry) or year three (seven+ entry). The most common entry point for senior schools is at 11+ (year seven). Prep and junior schools attached to a senior school may well give automatic entry into year seven, allowing you to avoid another journey through the admission process. Some schools also have 13+ (year nine) and 16+ entry (sixth form). As well as fixed entry points, schools sometimes have 'occasional places', when spaces arise in other year groups.

It's always a good idea to begin exploring schools well in advance of an entry point. A school's website will give you a sense of what it offers. As well as the headteacher's cheery welcome, look at the achievements the school highlights on its news page and how it describes its curriculum. You will also want to look at academic results and post-18 destinations but it's crucial to look beyond raw figures. Do students pursue a diverse range of university courses, reflecting different interests and strengths? Is there support for applications to overseas universities? Consider the value a school places on individual progress and breadth of opportunity, rather than just top grades – does it celebrate personal growth, creative achievements or non-traditional pathways alongside academic success? Understanding these aspects will give you a fuller picture of the school's ethos and whether it aligns with your child's aspirations.

Open days are a great way of getting to know a school. They often take place at the weekend though, so be sure to attend a weekday tour as well so that you can see the school



Year three is a common intake point for preps

in action. As you're being shown around, try to get a feel for the school. Does it seem like the kind of place your child would thrive? Look for the smiles, the quality of interaction in lessons and the friendliness of the environment.

When it comes to asking questions, ask senior leaders about the strategic direction of the school and the future plans that excite them the most. Ask practical questions about coach routes, school lunches and wraparound care to the school's dedicated admissions team.

If you have the opportunity to talk to students, you can gain an insider's perspective and triangulate their perspective with the answers given by the headteacher! What are students most excited about for the school's future? What makes them happy at school? If you're able to talk to current parents, ask them for their perspective on ►



A weekday tour will give you an insight into how things are handled in the classroom



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Students will give you honest answers about life at the school

subjects such as homework, sports provision and home-school communication.

Information about scholarships and bursaries will be available on schools' websites but be sure to ask for further information when you visit. Scholarships are awarded for talent or potential in a particular area, including general academic ability or prowess in sport, art or music as well as an increasing number of other areas. Scholarships are typically awarded based on performance in entrance exams, auditions or trials. They often include a reduction in fees and provide an enrichment programme designed to support the student's development in their particular area of strength. Bursaries are means-tested funding that schools offer to maintain the accessibility of their education to students from all backgrounds. Bursaries can cover up to 100% of school fees, as well as other expenses such as uniform, lunches and transportation. A school's admissions team will be happy to explain the application process, which is always handled with the utmost discretion. ☺

A girls' school, North London Collegiate School was established in 1850



SIX OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS FOR PARENTS TO CONSIDER

- **Strong academic results are important, but pupil wellbeing is just as crucial.** Ask how the school goes about supporting both, and what this balance looks like in everyday school life.
- Does the school offer a broad and enriching curriculum? In junior school, are subjects such as languages and debating included? At senior-school level, do students have access to a wide range of GCSEs, A-levels, or even the International Baccalaureate Diploma?
- **Beyond academics, does the extracurricular programme cater to your child's interests, from music and drama to sport and STEM clubs? Can students initiate their own activities?**
- In a through-school, how well do junior and senior pupils interact? In a single-sex school, are there links with nearby boys' or girls' schools?
- **Leadership roles help children develop confidence – ask about school councils, house systems and mentoring.**
- Most importantly, visit schools together – your child's happiness matters most and their opinion, whether aged three or 13, is invaluable!