

Is the best school the right school?

This month thousands of parents will attend secondary school open days in order to spot the “best” one for their child. Education consultant Lisa Freedman suggests what to look for.

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Annie Williams, the head teacher at Holy Trinity & S Silas primary, with some of her older students

Antique dealer Antonia White is sitting exhausted on a sofa. She’s just returned from yet another three-hour stint looking at secondary schools for her 10-year-old daughter Clare. “I’m shattered,” she says. “It’s stressful and boring. All the chemistry labs look the same and all the parents look like people we wouldn’t want to know.”

Her comments will strike a chord with thousands of other parents this autumn, as September and October are peak season for secondary-school open days (parents need to be on the ball as the dates are often only listed on the school’s website, sometimes at the last moment). For the next few weeks, those with children approaching the next stage of their school career (both in the state and private sector) will be making their way along packed corridors, trying to spot the “best” school for their child. It can be an uncomfortable process – at some popular London secondaries the queues stretch down the street. (The public school system still has its main entrance point at 13, after prep school.)

Ideally, anyone looking for a school from age 11 should begin the search when their child has just started Year 5. This helps whittle down the choices before the final year at primary school (Year 6). Drawing up a shortlist when a child is 9 or 10 also allows for a year of coaching for 11-plus exams for selective state and private schools.

An early start makes sense because secondary transfer forms for children at state schools have to be handed in during the autumn term of the final primary year, which is also the usual registration deadline for independent day school entrance. In addition you need time to fill out complex forms accurately, understand “aptitude” criteria, meet deadlines – and, for faith schools, church attendance criteria.

In my work as an education consultant specialising in secondary transfer, I advise clients to take the first tour of a school alone when their child is in Year 5 and then, if happy, go again with the child in Year 6.

PRIMARY HELP

How one school steers parents through the process

One of the key sources of information and help through the secondary school application process will be your child's primary school, writes Isabel Berwick. At Holy Trinity & St Silas Church of England school in north London – ranked fourth in Britain in 2008 for a combination of top results and offering “added value” in its teaching – the academic year always starts with a meeting for parents of the 10-year-olds who are one year away from starting secondary school.

Annie Williams, the head teacher at Holy Trinity & St Silas, says, “It all begins in September. We have a meeting before the open days, we explain procedures, give out a booklet explaining everything, and we answer parents' questions: many parents worry, for example, about taking their children out of school to go to an open day. “We encourage them to go with their children to visit secondary schools, and to get a flavour of the school in action.”

While Holy Trinity & St Silas has a culturally mixed intake, reflecting the inner-city community it serves, Williams asks all families to set aside preconceptions and consider a wide range of schools. While most pupils go on to the local state secondaries, Williams also has strong links with many of north London's independent schools and will alert gifted and talented pupils to schools offering full-fees bursaries: “Some of our biggest successes have been children who came to the UK as refugees and who have gone on from here to a bursary at a local prep school and then a scholarship at public school.”

She stresses the importance of parents taking children's views into account – but teachers who know the child will also offer advice. “We guide each parent according to where we think their child is going to be happy.”

If a child doesn't get a place, or the family goes to appeal, Williams and the chairman of the school governors will always offer their help and support. It's an approach that seems to work: all the summer 2009 leavers, says Williams, have just begun their new lives at the secondary schools they wanted to attend.

In practise, “open day” often means just an hour or two – not enough for parents to work out whether a school's values are going to agree with their own. However, many schools offer visits during their working day. Though pupils are usually on their best behaviour at these times, you'll get a much clearer sense of whether teachers are friendly and energetic, and students well behaved and considerate.

Don't forget to look carefully at the detail: are the displays on the noticeboards lively and up to date? What do the displays of work look like? Are there sweet wrappers and litter on the floor? Make sure you visit the pupils' cloakrooms – are the lavatories clean and graffiti-free?

Sneak a glance at other would-be parents and listen to their questions. If City-suited fathers demand to know how many leavers go on to medicine and law, it's a warning that a daughter who is an arty alternative type might not thrive. However, beware of writing off a school too quickly: parents from small primary schools will find the size of secondary schools intimidating, but large numbers of

pupils will also mean a wide variety of potential friends for a child – and a curriculum to match every interest.

At any open day, says Ralph Lucas, editor of *The Good Schools Guide*, the key is to listen to what the head has to say. “You have to go and see the head. Even if it’s only listening to a speech and getting a sense of what’s important to them. We’re used to judging subconsciously and you quickly get an idea of whether the head’s slippery or an upstanding gent. You don’t have to like them but you do have to respect them.”

Sometimes an outstanding head can inspire parents to commit to a new school – or a failing one. In London, where catchment areas usually include both middle-class pockets and social housing, the reputation of a school can be transformed by a good head, and once word of mouth gets around, middle-class parents who shunned their local comp may come flooding back.

Even the most unloved school can thrive under an inspiring head: Hackney Downs, an inner-London secondary in a deprived area, has been transformed under “super head” Sir Michael Wilshaw. Once notorious, it was reinvented as Mossbourne Community Academy in 2004, and in 2008 the school had six applicants for each of its 180 places. In its GCSE results this year, 84 per cent of pupils achieved five A* to C grades in subjects including English and maths.

Schools are of course highly individual micro-cultures; parents should be open-minded, and beware of imposing their own feelings on a child. As Dr Anthony Seldon, headmaster of Wellington College in Berkshire, warns: “Many parents choose the school they would have liked to have gone to themselves rather than the school that will actually work best for their son or daughter.”

The notion of “parental choice” when selecting state schools is, however, worthless for families living outside a catchment area, or subject to a selection “lottery” practised by local authorities such as Brighton. (In the latter, secondary school places are allocated by random selection rather than by proximity to school gates.)

Although the process can be impossible to control, it still makes sense (and helps parents feel better) to start off by considering the fundamentals. Some questions to ask include: does it matter if the school is fee-paying or free, selective or inclusive, day or boarding, single sex or co-ed? How often do pupils play games? Are there alternatives for the non-sporty? Will they expel a delinquent teen at the first whiff of marijuana – or only after grievous bodily harm?

There are very few state secondaries at the top of the league tables that are non-selective academically. Those that are non-academically selective are often faith schools – the Jewish Free School in north London and the Roman Catholic London Oratory School are two examples.

In the words of one London independent school head, the top selective schools are fighting it out for “the brightest and the best”. But even if your child has the ability and stamina to cruise through often gruelling exams, you should consider whether he or she would thrive at a “top” school. Many of them have a heavy workload and pile on the pressure. “My son is a bright boy,” says Hermione Evans, a City solicitor, “but he also has a neurotic fear of failure. I realised he wouldn’t be happy at one grammar school I’d originally put top of my admissions form and I decided to pull him out before he sat the tests.”

Perhaps the most underrated factor when choosing a secondary school is journey time. Understandably desperate for a place at a good secondary, parents often fail to consider the implications of distance. In London, children often travel several miles to selective secondaries and private schools. (Equally, parents who have moved to the country often find that once their children have left the local village primary they face a very long bus journey to the local comprehensive.) No matter how outstanding a school’s exam results, if it takes too long to get there, or the journey is too complicated, then you may end up with an exhausted and unhappy child.

The Latymer School in Edmonton, north London, one of the country’s leading selective state schools, insists that applicants must prove their daily commute by public transport is no longer than

one hour. To understand how wise they are, think about commuting at the end of a working day. Many people do travel for more than an hour each way to work and back but few of these adults then have to complete three hours of homework.

After open days, the next task is to read inspection reports. These are published by Ofsted (www.ofsted.gov.uk) for state sector and by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (www.isi.net) for most independent schools. Reports are cautiously worded and date quickly but can offer insight into aspects of school life not highlighted in the prospectus. In inspection jargon, “satisfactory” or “good” is often damning with faint praise. “Outstanding” and “excellent” are the words to look for.

School choice, of course, is only a choice if you actually have an option and, particularly in London, this is rarely the case. Like its fellow sufferers New York and Dubai, the capital doesn't have enough good schooling to go round. At leading independent day schools there can be four applicants for every place; while in state grammars, that figure whizzes up to 10 or more.

For in-demand comprehensives, applicants need to live as near the gates as possible, and some councils now have a tool on their websites that will check distance from its schools. Primary schools should offer support with choosing a secondary school. My advice to parents who want a grammar school place (whatever head teachers say to the contrary), is to have their child coached for the exams.

The canniest parents play by every subclause of school admissions policies and know where there's some advantage to be gained for musicians, or budding actors and dancers. Close reading of the small print on school websites can pay off.

In the independent day sector, it is usual to enter children for more than one selective exam. Families who are offered more than one place are in a lucky, if tricky, position. There is just a two-week window (at the end of February and beginning of March) between offers going out and the deadline to commit to just one school. For such families this can be a time of sleepless nights. In the state sector a child will only be allocated one place.

The recession has had several consequences for school applications. Parents who might once have chosen boarding schools are now looking at day schools and there are more applicants than ever for grammar schools. In the 2009 admissions round, for example, two of London's leading independent day schools, Highgate and University College School, both saw a more than 10 per cent rise in the number of applicants. At Henrietta Barnett, London's pre-eminent girls' grammar, 1,298 girls applied for just 93 places last year – 117 up on 2007.

In the private sector, candidates who have passed the written exam are put on a waiting list and may find a place if other higher-placed candidates do not take up their places. In the state sector there is always the right of appeal. In 2006-2007, the last year for which figures are available, there were 53,570 appeals, of which about 35 per cent were successful. The likelihood of winning a place on appeal will depend on the strength of your case. “Medical grounds and traumatic circumstances are the most convincing,” says Matt Richards of School Appeals Services, a consultancy specialising in helping parents through the secondary school appeals process. He adds: “Saying the school down the road is better is the least [successful reason].” And if you live in London, the odds of a successful appeal for a state secondary are slim. At the popular Holland Park school in west London, 60 disappointed families went to appeal last year. Only one was successful.

If an appeal does not work and independent schools are not an option, the best plan is to take the offered place and stay on the waiting list at the first choice of school. Places often come up a year or two later. More drastically, some families move house or, for those truly out of love with the schools system, home schooling is gaining in popularity.

Some names have been changed

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