

## Top 10 Tips for Choosing a School

### Visit on a normal school day

The best way to gauge a school is to see it operating normally. Open days can be contrived affairs, especially if they take place on Saturdays or during the evening. It is easy for a school to send badly behaved pupils home and put on showcase lessons for an open event. Whether or not a school is willing to show you round individually is a measure of how flexible they are and whether they treat parents as welcome or see them as an intrusion.

Watch how the pupils interact at break time. Is there a sense of fun and camaraderie or is there tension. Noise and chatter during break is good as children need to let off steam and this is the place to do it. Are there pupils looking unhappy or on the edge?

### Check out the Ethos of the school

Find out about the ethos of the school, as it is important it is compatible with your own values. Does the school promote your values or does it promote values different from yours? Do the objectives of the school suit the disposition of your own child, his or her character and personality, strengths and weaknesses? You can do this by asking questions of staff and pupils.

### What to look out for in the classroom

If you can, make sure that you are shown inside some classes during your visit. Be sensitive here as teachers cannot always immediately stop what they are doing and engage in a long conversation but if you wait politely they should come over and explain to you what they are doing.

### Look at the interaction

What is the atmosphere in the classroom? Is there a buzz of excitement? Are pupils interested and interacting with the teacher? Are they focused? Are they behaving appropriately and respectfully? Did they look happy?

### Look at some exercise books

Being sensitive, ask if you can look at some of the pupils' work. Exercise books should be clearly marked with helpful comments that enable pupils to learn from their mistakes and improve. This is called Formative Marking. In a good school there will be plenty of it.

### Examine people not statistics

In an age of league tables do not be fooled by statistics. It is said that if we do not "measure what we value" we will end up "valuing only what we can measure". There are many games that schools play to better their positions in the league tables, many of which

are not in the best interests of pupils. Whilst academic achievement is a very important factor, it is only one of the aspects to consider when deciding on a school for your child.

Talk to the Head and some of the key teaching staff

Make sure that you feel comfortable with the Head as he or she sets the tone for the entire school. How does the Head deal with your questions? Does he or she show an interest in your child?

Make sure you meet the key staff that will be teaching your child. If you feel comfortable with them, it is likely that your child will too. Try and gauge why teachers teach at the school. Is it just a job or do they really enjoy the school and care for the pupils? Good teachers are really interested in their pupils and will show them the kind of care that you want to see.

Ask if you can speak to pupils

This obviously has to be done in a supervised setting for child protection reasons but speaking to several pupils and getting their views on the school can be a useful source of information. If they have depth of maturity then this will show in their confidence in speaking with you. If they are confident, happy and polite, then you can assume that this is how your child will also be educated.

Ask about current past pupils

One of the best indicators for the success of your son or daughter is the success of previous classes. Ask which exit schools pupils go on to. Ask about existing or past pupils with similar characteristics to your son or daughter.

Pay Directories and School Guides

There are many good guides around, especially online. However some guides only offer information on those schools that pay for a listing. There are 2500+ independent schools to choose from, so relying exclusively on a guide can limit your options. There is no need to pay a guide to see school information. A wealth of school information is available online, or can be sent to you on request. Ofsted reports are available free online and will tell you a great deal about a school, its teaching and academic standards, as well as its educational philosophy.

In Conclusion

After doing your research, go back to basics. Parents take many factors into account when choosing the best school for their child. In truth, however, there is no school that is best for every child. League tables can measure exam success and determine the 'best school measured by academic achievement', but the challenge for parents is to choose the 'right school', taking into account many other factors.

The real starting point for choosing a school has to begin with you and your hopes and aspirations for your child. You know them better than anyone else and can best judge their strengths and weaknesses. You are in the best position to know what type of school will be right for them. You need to match the qualities you consider right for education with those offered by the right school.