

# How to choose the right Secondary School for your Child

Sept 2018

- 1. If you're asking for help and information, you're half way there;** whatever school you choose, you clearly care enough to find out more and that's the most important factor for any child to make the best of their education.
- 2. Write a list of questions you want to have answered.** Put down all the issues that matter to you. It may be that you feel able to do that before you visit any schools; however, you may also find that looking at other schools changes/adds to this list of questions. (There is a list of questions to ask at the end of this note).
- 3. Visit schools.** There is no shortcut to this. A school can look very different in the day to the evening so try to do both if you can. During the evening, you'll have a chance to see the **breadth** of their curriculum as well as being able to talk to the students themselves. Day visits allow you to see their **teaching style in practice** which is invaluable to judging how the teacher engages the students. Try looking in Year 5 so that you can compare a school from one year to the next. If your child wants to visit, leave that until Year 6 when you'll have decided which ones you do or don't want to consider in your final list. It's also a good way of making sure that your child doesn't choose a school that you can't/won't accept. Be also very clear as to each school's ENTRY CRITERIA. **PLEASE check each school's criteria carefully to see how well your child fit's their criteria.**

You are welcome to visit schools with your child during the school day. Please let us know beforehand so that we can put this in the register.

**4. Be prepared to be Open Minded.** Each person will remember their own school experiences. Remember, this is not your chance to re-live them (for better or worse). Your child may be very different from. Equally, until you have confirmation of the school you are going to be offered, please find positives about EVERY school.

**5. Look very carefully at the ethos of the school?** Or, to put it another way, what values does the school uphold? How does the school manage the emotional changes of a Year 7 student to Year 11 through to Year 13? Is the environment a constructive one (fostering independence)? How does the school add value outside of the academic focus? How well do they differentiate the needs of all their students? **Please take time to listen to the Headteachers talk during an Open Day or Evening visit.**

**6. Check out the schools "PROGRESS 8" scores.** In 2015, Hounslow was placed 13<sup>th</sup> out of 151 authorities in England for top GCSE results. Since 2016, there has been a change to the way parents can assess the "added value" a school achieves.

The Government have formally introduced a new value added measure called "**Progress 8**". It compares pupils with the same prior attainment so that you can see which schools add value during the time they come in at Year 7 until the end of Year 11. If collectively, that year group attain grades that are positive, the year group have, on average, achieved results better than expected. For example, if a school score is 0.5 then, on average, that year group achieved grades that were half a level higher than were expected when they first joined the school in Year 7.

There is also another new measure called "**Attainment 8**" which measures 8 main subject areas (with English and Maths being worth double the value of any other subjects) to be able to evaluate a school with. In the past, the Government issues the Performance tables in January but provisional tables will normally be issued before 31<sup>st</sup> October.

To find out an individual school's Progress and Attainment 8 scores, please go online to the government website at:-

<https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>

**7. Trust your gut instinct.** Research shows that we often make up our minds, with good reason, very quickly. Have a look at the pupils and ask "can I see my child fitting in?" or "are their pupils a reflection on how I want my child to be?" Remember, though, that between Year 6 and 7 there is a large gap and that at puberty, there are so many changes that they go through. Children will usually want to follow their friends – that may or may not be best for them as an individual. Again, experience shows that most children will go on to make new friends, whether they continue to keep in contact with their previous friends or not.

It's not just the answers that may sway you – it's also how the school answers your questions.

**8. Make your decision.** NO school is perfect. Yet there are schools that are better suited to your child and your values. Ask yourself if you can provide anything that the school can't or isn't able to provide. Your child will get the best out of a education when the parent(s) and the school work together with that child. It takes all three (the student, the parent(s) and the school) to get the best from their ongoing education.

## Potential Questions

Remember that each child is different, even within the same family. Each family will have their own priorities/values that may be more or less important than someone else. It is also worth asking the existing students some of these questions - they are likely to give you an honest answer.

- How will he/she travel to school? Walking/ Bus(es)/ Train(s)?
- How long will it take?
- Do you want single sex or mixed schooling?
- What advantages are there to either one or the other? (this is worth asking of each school you visit to see what their answer is)
- How long has the Headteacher been in place? What is the likelihood of him/her leaving?
- How do they teach different abilities of children?
- How does the school let you know about your child's performance?
- How often do they give you updates/reports?
- How do they teach to different learning styles (ie visual, audio or kinaesthetic learning styles)?
- What is their Behaviour Code? How well is it applied? Do they follow up ie what levels of discipline do they have and how do they judge it's effectiveness? How do they deal with bullying?
- When do they mix abilities and when do they stream the students? What are the advantages/disadvantages to either mixed ability or streaming (which can vary from subject to subject)?
- What is the procedure if a student is not performing to their expected ability?
- What clubs do they run outside of school? Do they cost any money? Do they run any exam revision classes? Do they cost any money?
- Is the environment a nurturing one? Or is it competitive? (be very clear in your own mind as to which would suit your child)
- Do they provide the right structure for my child? ie very formal and structured or more relaxed?
- How does the school communicate with parents? How easy is it to send a query into the school? How long should it take to get a reply?
- What motivates my child to do their best? How does this school provide the environment to help them thrive?
- Do the students at the school behave in a way that you'd like your child to behave?
- Can you imagine your child making friends at this school?
- What value does this school add to their students, outside of the classroom?

- Does the school have any formal links with other organisations (which shows diversity and breadth of education)? What value do the students gain from that link? What do they offer with regard to Music/Sports/Drama/Cooking/Debating etc outside of the curriculum ie as an extra-curricular activity?

When you look around during the day or the evening,

1. Watch and see if the students are all engaged in learning.
2. Check several of the school work books. Do the teachers give feedback on the students work? Is it marked regularly (ie every week? Once a month? Check in case there are several books that they could be using for any one subject)
3. Do the students have a clear idea of what level they are at and which level they are trying to move on to?
4. Does the student know WHAT they need to do, to reach the next level up?

# UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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As a result in changes to the law in recent years, there are now a number of different types of schools.

Briefly, there are Maintained Schools (which includes Community Schools; Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled), Academics (of which Free Schools are a type) and other types.

## **ACADEMIES**

While there are different types of academies in operation in England, they all have the same status in law as 'academies'. They are

- Publically funded (ie they are paid for from the state)
- Independent of the local education authority (the money comes from central government, not from the local borough)
- Can be held to account through a legally binding 'funding agreement'

They have more freedom and control over their Curriculum design, School hours, Term dates, Staff pay and conditions.

Free schools, academy converters and traditional academies all come under this umbrella but with key differences focussed on;-

1. Who sets them up;
2. Why they are set up;
3. Whether there was a previous school;
4. What the 'provider' has to demonstrate in order to be given permission to set one up.

FREE SCHOOLS are new state schools (and can include independent schools which become state schools for the first time). They can be set up by Teachers, Parents, existing schools, educational charities, universities and community groups. They are run free from local education authority control but are still accountable through a Department of Education agreement.

TRADITIONAL ACADEMIES were underperforming existing schools who are handed over to an academy sponsor to take over the running of the school. These sponsors can be universities, FE colleges, education charities and business sponsors. Like Free Schools, they are free from the control of local education authorities but are accountable through a funding agreement with the Department of Education.

ACADEMY CONVERTERS were, usually, high performing schools already in existence, who opted out of the local education authority to gain independence and autonomy. They are set up by existing state schools.

## **MAINTAINED SCHOOLS**

These are schools like Grove Park that are still maintained/overseen by the local education authority, such as Hounslow borough. They must follow the National Curriculum as well as national teacher pay and conditions.

There are four different types, depending upon who employs the staff; who owns the land and the buildings plus who controls the admissions arrangements.

1. COMMUNITY SCHOOLS are schools (such as Grove Park) which are controlled and run by the local authority (Hounslow).
2. FOUNDATION and TRUST SCHOOLS are run by the governing body, who employ the staff and set their own admissions criteria. The land and buildings are usually owned by the governing body or a charity (Trust Schools).
3. VOLUNTARY AIDED SCHOOLS (VA) are usually faith schools. A foundation or trust will input a small proportion of the capital costs for the school and form a majority on the schools governing body. The governing body employ the staff and set the admissions criteria. The land and buildings are usually owned by the religious organisation.
4. VOLUNTARY CONTROLLED SCHOOLS (VC) are like the VA schools but are run by the local authority. The local authority employs the staff and set the admissions criteria. The foundation or trust (usually a religious organisation) own the land and buildings, and usually form a quarter of the governing body.

## **OTHER TYPES OF SCHOOL**

These differ from how they are funded and how they can select their pupils.

GRAMMER SCHOOLS are state funded, which select their pupils on the basis of academic ability. This means that they can also be maintained schools. (Please note, however, that there are some schools that are independent and fee-paying, which is from when government changes years ago meant some grammar schools decided not to stay in the state sector but to become private. Kingston Grammar is one such school).

INDEPENDENT/PRIVATE SCHOOLS charge fees to attend and can make a profit. They are governed and operated by the school, or they may be part of a trust. There is a more informal regulation of accountability to the government.

There are more detailed differences between each type, depending upon

- The Curriculum
- The students
- Finance
- Staff
- Governance
- Accountability

Below is a summarised list of key differences.

### CURRICULUM

Maintained Schools have to follow the National Curriculum; Free Schools, Academies and Independent Schools do not. The latter three must teach certain subjects, including Maths, English and Science and must provide a broad curriculum (with Independents needing to cover an 'experience' in languages, maths, science, technology, human, social, physical and aesthetic and creative education).

TEACHING HOURS for all but maintained schools are free to be changed by day or term lengths. VC and Community schools have to go through a consultation process to change the school day.

SPECIAL NEEDS PROVISION. Free Schools and Academies must have a clear SEND (Special Educational Need and Disabilities) policy, following the national code of practice. Maintained schools must follow the national code of practice, overseen by the local authority. Independent schools must ensure that they have facilities and access suitable for those with SEND.

FUNDING ALLOCATION. Free Schools, Academies and Maintained schools are free to allocate funds as they choose but with Maintained schools, the local authority can keep a proportion back for 'central services'.

TEACHER SELECTION CRITERIA. Free Schools are NOT required to have teachers with formal qualifications (except the SENCO) but are required to have a training and development plan in place. Academies and Maintained schools are required to have teachers that are formally trained at a minimum QTS standard. Independent schools are free to hire as required.