



School CHOICES

A Pre-test Purgatory

Henry Faber from Oppidan Education on how to choose your child's first school and beyond

Half a million children educated in the private system, ever-increasing numbers of international students and rocketing school fees: we live in transitional and uncertain times for the world of private education. And yet, for those applying to oversubscribed private schools, competition for places is stronger than it has ever been. Increasingly complex pre-testing by schools at every age, and indecision and uncertainty on the part of parents, has led to a painful purgatory at 8+, 11+ and 13+, with testing challenges for students, parents and schools to get the right fit. Only ten years ago a child would have had a first choice school and a back-up. In today's climate, parents often come to us with a list of ten

schools from which to choose.

In my experience, parents are fairly sure on what they want from a school. To preach too much on the choices available would be to teach my grandmother to suck eggs. Parents will ultimately make up their own minds, but here are some tips and tricks that might help along the way.

Academics: of course exams are important, but they are only the finish line. What path do they take to encourage learning? Are classes streamed and fairly divided? Are creative interests fostered within the classroom? Prep schools need to be on their toes in leading children towards greater independence in their learning habits. The facilities: how forward-looking is a school? Is there construction in process or in the pipeline? Schools must constantly invest in their facilities to stay ahead of the curve. Boarding life: if the school offers boarding, how modern and comfortable are its dorms and rooms? Schools will always have a shiny new boarding house to show off, but can they offer up a consistent quality of life for your child across age groups? Whether boarding or day, ask the right questions of the Head concerning pastoral care; will your children be happy and, above all else, safe?

Putting to one side the bare essentials of school life and the choices on offer, the process of choosing a school must be more parent-focused than school-focused. At Oppidan we suggest practical and productive tips that will ensure your child's school ends up being the right one.

First and foremost, be proactive. Too many parents come to us too late in the day and there is little that can be done. Engage with the process early on, find out what your options are and above all, visit the

schools. I have heard long and laborious conversations, even within my own family, concerning what options are available and how they match up. Time spent theorising is wasted until parents have taken the time to visit a school and speak to its admissions team. At this point, the process really begins and the to-do list grows.

Secondly, be realistic. It is essential to manage parents' expectations in order to ensure a successful fit. Above all, this is



about being fair to your child. With the right advice from your current school or a consultant, a parent should soon gain an objective perspective on their child's suitability for a certain school. There is then no use trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, and if parents aim too high or wide of the mark, their end result will disappoint.

Thirdly, a list of schools should reflect variety and options. There is little point selecting five schools that all share the same assets and pitch themselves at the same academic level. Finding this variety

is about being hands-on with schools and doing your best to know them well. By understanding what is special about what they offer, you will be in a better position to create a shortlist that is varied, realistic and exciting; whichever school ends up the winner.

Next, be decisive. The dithering parent is so typical of a complicated educational climate like this. Longer waiting lists and wider options do not help in leaving parents too little time to make their minds up. A decisive approach to school choices will ensure that there is calm, yet assured, action taking place. Children feel more at ease with the process, as do their parents.

Finally, it is vital never to be rude about any school, whatever your personal views. Too often I have seen children infected by the harsh opinions of their parents, only to end up being sent there themselves. Children have a tendency to repeat these thoughts at school, leading to an unnecessarily cruel hierarchy of school placements in an already intense and competitive environment.

This list of tips and tricks is primarily aimed at parents, to whom the great share of the work applies, but let's not forget the children themselves. Parents will have their own idea of how much to involve their child in the decision-making process. Above all, I would advise consistency in their approach. The last thing a child needs is further anxiety.

Henry Faber and Walter Kerr started Oppidan Education to offer honest advice on schools and to mentor students towards greater confidence, comfort and technique, whatever their age or ability. oppidaneducation.com

Five Top Tips for Choosing the Right School by Walter Kerr

- 1 Visit the school: the only way of making an informed decision about your child's education is to go and see the school for yourself. Meet the staff, the teachers and the matrons, chat to the students about what life is like there, visit the boarding houses and see the new facilities being built. You'll know straight away if it is the right fit.
- 2 Ask the right questions: aside from graduate prospects and league tables, it's vital to know what sort of education your son or daughter will be getting at that particular school. Does the school focus on independent learning? Does the teaching style transcend exam requirements?
- 3 Manage your expectations: it is of paramount importance to be realistic about your child's education. Pushing them towards schools that are too academic and watching them fail to gain a place can have long-term implications for that child; be fair to them and be realistic on what is achievable.
- 4 Be varied in your choices: whether boarding or day, mixed or single-sex, forward-looking or traditional, having a focused ideal on the type of school you want for your child is to be supported. Try, however, to pick a diverse range of schools so that all eventualities, positive or negative, are covered.
- 5 Listen to your child: a child will directly or indirectly lean towards a particular school that you visit and their view must be taken into account. Children perform better in pre-tests to schools that they aspire to, and genuine enthusiasm for a school manifests itself decisively at interview. It is not something to be ignored.