



# INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS GUIDE

Everything you need to know about educating your  
child privately. By Vanessa Berridge



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Visit various schools during term time to see if the children seem happy



# HOW TO CHOOSE A SCHOOL

It's one of the biggest decisions for any parent. Approach it in an informed, open-minded way, however, and you will find the perfect solution...

Choosing a school is probably the single most important decision that any parent will have to make. That choice will determine not only the type and quality of your children's academic education, but also the friends they make and the attitudes they'll carry with them into adult life.

There is considerable pressure on both schools and parents these days, with endless discussion of league tables, arguments about grade inflation, and competition for university places.

If you live in London and the southeast, many schools are oversubscribed and the competition for the most academically selective schools is fierce. It can even be tough to squeeze children into non-selective pre-prep schools. I rang one three weeks after the January birth of my first son to be told that I'd left it rather late. Stung, I rang some weeks before the anticipated August birth of

my second son. Again, I hit a brick wall. The kindly school secretary suggested that I hang on until September to be sure of a place. He arrived early and went elsewhere.

Early choices are not so crucial, perhaps, because there are subsequent chances to turn things round. But, on the other hand, your child's nursery school will be a first brush with education and if the child is unhappy or intimidated, a pattern for later years may be set. And, looking just a couple of years ahead, when choosing a pre-prep or prep school, you will need to bear in mind your ultimate objective for your child.

These are the engine years of a child's school career, so arguably this choice is equally as important as your choice of public school. Certain prep schools are feeders, so a child at Summer Fields or The Dragon, say, will be well prepared for the entrance exams for schools such as Eton or >

Marlborough. Pre-testing 11-year-olds is becoming more common in elite schools, so your child needs to be able to hit the ground running early on.

Talk to educationalists, and all will say: know your child. That is easier said than done, particularly with a first child, when you may have less idea of what is reasonable to expect and at what age. That's why you need to listen to advice from your pre-prep or prep school head, who can make informed judgements about both your child's academic potential and emotional resilience.

Some academic high-flyers might do better, for instance, in a smaller, more nurturing school than in a large competitive boys-only boarding school – even if it's the one that you, your father and grandfather all went to. It's worth remembering that it's as much in the head's interest as yours to get your child to the right school.

You should always visit any school you're considering. At one pre-prep, my husband and I were put on children's chairs, our noses on the level of the head's desk, behind which she sat looking down on us. Our boys didn't go there.

A good place to start is the Independent Schools Show (the next one takes place on 9 and 10 November at Battersea Evolution, Battersea Park, London). Speakers will discuss a range of educational issues, and more than 170 nurseries, preparatory and senior schools will be exhibiting. For parents, the balance of power is reversed on such an occasion, with the various schools competing for your attention, rather than your arriving



A mini-beast hunt encourages early interest in the environment

◆ League tables are only a guide. Statistics can be misleading: a couple fewer A\*s at GCSE or A level may cause a school to tumble several places without any reduction in its overall performance. The tables also give no indication of added value, important when academic results appear, on the surface, to be less impressive.

◆ The more questions you ask of more schools, the more likely you are to get the right answer.

### Visiting a school

◆ Visit schools during term time for a sense of how they are run, and whether the children seem happy and how they react to the teachers. (A wet break will be the most testing time, so you can view the school other than on a gloriously sunny day when any school looks good.)

◆ Assess how the tour is handled. Is it led by the head, with little chance to ask questions of the teachers and pupils? If so, is the school trying to hide something? A senior pupil-led tour is likely to be more informative. ◆ Ask to observe lessons, both in the classroom and in the gym or on the games fields.

◆ Try to talk to pupils and teachers away from the eagle eye of the head.

◆ Look behind the scenes in the cloakrooms, bathrooms and dining rooms, etc.

◆ Look, too, at classroom walls, and gauge the quality of the displays, both in terms of teaching materials and pupil participation.

◆ If the school claims to offer a wide range of activities, and several levels of teams at competitive sports, check whether these are reflected on the noticeboards in the school.

◆ Ultimately, just trust your own judgement. ■

*'Because a school is famous and well known, it does not mean that it is right for your child, or is at its peak'*

at the school as hopeful supplicants.

To get you started, here are the things to look for when drawing up a shortlist and when visiting a school.

### Drawing up a shortlist

◆ Keep an open mind. If you're considering a day school, you'll obviously be constrained by distance, but if you're looking at boarding, you can really think 'outside the box'.

◆ Schools, like stocks and shares, go up and down. Because a school is famous and well known, it is not necessarily either right for your child or indeed currently at its peak.

◆ Talk to parents at any school you are considering, and don't listen to alcohol-fuelled dinner party conversation.

◆ Assess your children as objectively as you can – are they lively and outgoing or quiet and reflective? Will they thrive in a more active, competitive environment or do they need more nurturing and one-to-one attention?

◆ Listen to the head of your child's present school. Don't ignore informed advice and try to push your child into an unsuitable school.

◆ Make visits alone before taking your child to no more than one or two schools you are seriously considering.



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# GOOD GOVERNANCE

If you want to judge the quality of a school, start by looking at the top...

**W**hen you're considering a school, the composition of its governing board is unlikely to cross your mind. Yet the role of the governors is crucial to the success - or otherwise - of any school. For a start, in most independent schools, the board appoints both head and bursar (de facto finance director). Independent educational consultant Rosellen Mates states trenchantly: 'If those appointments aren't right, the school won't function properly.'

## Changing roles

As with so much else, the nature of governance has been transformed in recent years. 'Once upon a time, the governors' only job was to appoint the head,' says Charlotte Noel, schools

placement consultant at Gabbitas. 'Governors are now a board of specialists running a mid-sized company.'

Her comments are echoed by Adrian Underwood, governor of the mixed Wymondham College in Norfolk, and the largest state boarding school in Europe, with around 1,300 students of which 650 are boarders. 'It used to be a question of a nice lunch and a meeting once a term,' he says.

Underwood has vast experience, having been a housemaster, headmaster and bursar in the independent sector, and national director of the Boarding Schools Association (BSA) from 1998 to 2006, before joining Wymondham as a boarding governor. He stresses the increasing professionalism. 'It is a serious responsibility, needing real commitment. Governors

now have to give up a lot of time and offer expertise across a wide area.'

## So what do governors do?

Governors need to be 'critical friends', says Alun Michael, former chair of governors at the all-girls' Bromley High School in south London. He suggests their role is similar to that of a constitutional monarch, as defined by Walter Bagehot: 'to be consulted, to encourage and to warn'.

Bromley is a member of the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST), where governance is slightly different from most stand-alone schools, as the board chairman is appointed centrally by the Trust, as is the head, with advice from the board. Nevertheless, Caroline Hoare, GDST director of people, emphasises that 'a really strong >

governing body is crucial for the strategic plan of each individual school, and should act as a sounding board for the head’.

There are termly meetings of the full board, plus other committee work. Governors in most schools are encouraged to play to their own strengths when selecting their committees for areas such as the junior school, health and welfare, the academic curriculum, finance, estate planning, sports and modern languages.

The management of change is vital, says Michael. For the first time, Bromley has appointed an expert in information technology as a governor, but boards also have to respond to government policy on examinations and the curriculum, as well as to the constantly shifting aspirations of the pupils.

‘The job of a governor is to increase the potential of the school through specialist knowledge,’ says Noel of Gabbitas. ‘But it is also to monitor the school, with each governor taking time to observe lessons and activities, and to attend school plays, festivals and prize-givings. Governors need to be visible to staff, pupils and parents.’

Governors can also help forge links with the school’s local community, of particular importance now with the close scrutiny of the independent sector’s charitable status.

### How are governors chosen?

The number of governors, the method of their selection, and their length of service varies. Wyomondham, for instance, has 18 governors, while in GDST schools boards are limited to 10. Governors tend to serve for a minimum of three to four years.

According to GDST chairman, Lorna Cocking, most schools are look-



**Juniors at the highly academic Magdalen College School in Oxford**

ing for ‘an interest in education, strategic thinking, the ability to challenge constructively and willingness to act as an ambassador for the school’. A mix of experience and skills is needed, with governors chosen for their specialist knowledge of the law, business and finance, marketing, estate management, medicine, the local community, and, of course, academia.

*‘The job of a governor is to monitor the school, taking time to observe lessons and activities’*

Board representatives from academic institutions, including universities and other schools, provide a head with invaluable support and insights. Dr Tim Hands is master of the highly academic Magdalen College School in Oxford (with girls only admitted to the sixth form), and chairman of the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC). He is also a governor of the mixed co-ed boarding school, Bedales, and of

St Mary’s Calne, and has been a governor at Cheltenham College.

Retired heads Cynthia Hall of Wycombe Abbey and Nigel Richardson of The Perse School in Cambridge are on his governing board and he values their support. ‘They bring insights that no one else can, while going out helps me to get other perspectives.’

Dr Hands of Magdalen College School asks the governors for nominations once a year, building up a list of potential candidates and ‘lining up skills’, in his words.

Unlike in the maintained sector, most independent schools tend not to have parents as governors. Some, however, find parental involvement of benefit, as at Surbiton High School where a former PTA head, with two daughters at the school, became a governor. During her 10-year tenure, she sat in on interviews shortlisting a new junior head and worked on the welfare committee. ‘I liked getting to know the staff better,’ she says. ‘But I never used it nor found there was any conflict of interest.’

### What difference do governors make?

‘An efficient board is built up by a good head,’ says Ralph Lucas, editor of The Good Schools Guide. ‘Most boards are self-appointing and self-perpetuating and are not something that most people pay attention to unless things go wrong.’

He and Mates cite Stanbridge Earls, an independent school catering for children with special needs, as an example of bad governance. It has closed after falling registrations following allegations of sexual abuse of pupils. ‘Three years ago, it was an extraordinary school doing an extraordinary job,’ says Mates. ‘I am appalled that it has been forced to close.’ Lucas agrees: ‘The governors were coasting and not spotting signs.’

Stanbridge Earls is an extreme case, but an involved and active governing body can help to steer a school through the turbulent waters of contemporary education. And governors are no longer a hidden, mysterious cabal: most are listed on the school’s website, with details of their particular specialisms. So, when considering schools, it’s well worth taking account of the governing body as well. ■



**The Bedales school library**





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# THEN & NOW

Education is changing... and it's worth understanding how

**I**n May this year, I returned to my all girls' school for a 40-year reunion. It was an emotional occasion, which more than 50 of us attended, a remarkable number given that, in conversation, relatively few had entirely happy memories of the school.

When I joined in 1960, the south London school was a grant-maintained grammar that offered free places, funded by the local council, for about half the pupils, and assisted places for many others. In the late 1960s, the borough went comprehensive, council places were phased out and the school became entirely independent (although there are still bursaries for talented girls). The fees now are more than £5,000 per term, as opposed to about £60 in 1973 (a rise in real, not just nominal, terms).

The school looks very different from when we left in 1973. Bright new laboratories have replaced the three dark, dingy and dangerous rooms we remembered. The sports facilities now include a fitness suite, an indoor pool, and a gym with a sprung floor. There is less space to play outside as a result, but a new theatre, with tiered seating and proper lighting, a fully equipped teaching kitchen, plus bright, airy classrooms, seemed worth the shoehorning.

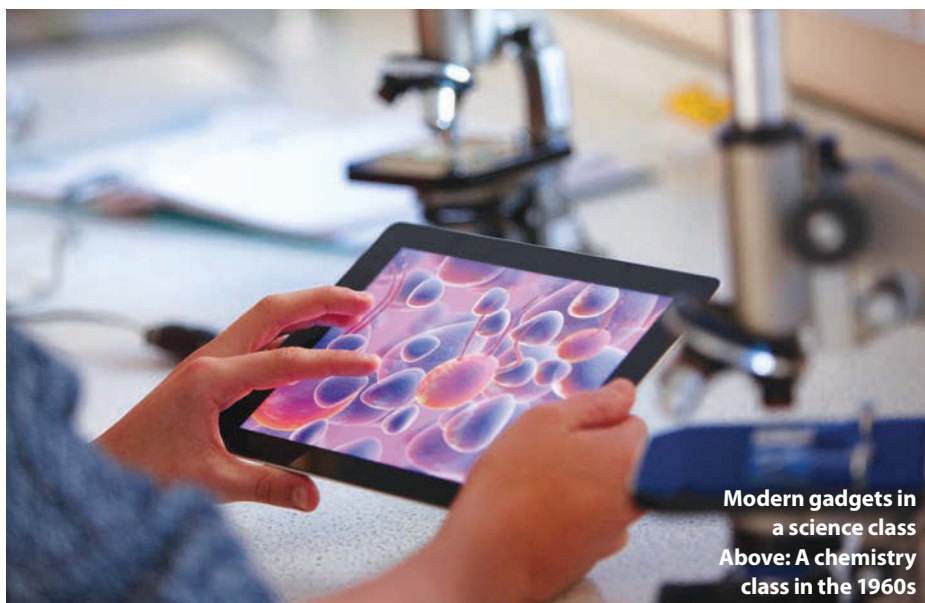
Yet the physical differences are

almost incidental. A far more important revolution has taken place in the style and delivery of education. The school was academically selective in our day and we were conscientiously prepared for exams, sitting timed essays over and over again until we could do them in our sleep. But the exams seemed the final objective, not even a key to unlock our future. 'We went to university as part of our passage into adulthood, much as young men in the 18th century went on a Grand Tour,' suggested one of my

contemporaries, now a professor of education.

There is no less emphasis now on exam success, and indeed with the advent of league tables, results have become even more vital. Yet the spirit behind that preparation seems entirely different, with the school recognising that exams are only a means to an end, not an end in themselves, and that girls must be made ready to acquit themselves creditably at university and beyond.

There's now a separate sixth- ▷



Modern gadgets in a science class  
Above: A chemistry class in the 1960s



form block, with its own café, run by the girls themselves. Libraries throughout the school display newspapers and periodicals, encouraging girls to interact with the world outside (we were allowed to read *The Times* and *Paris Match*, but then only when we were in the sixth form).

A poised and confident 14-year-old showed us round, corralling middle-aged women who wanted to reminisce in the cloakrooms rather than look at glossy new buildings. She had benefited from an approach that encourages girls to blow their own trumpets from an early age. Pennants were suspended around the hall, each one declaring a girl's triumph, even if it was only a Girl Guide badge. The spirit, we felt, was that they should have a go and not be frightened of either failure or success.

How different from our day, when, rather quaintly, we made favours out of wool and ribbon for the Oxford and Cambridge University boat race, as if there were only two universities in the world. And yet, with the school's sights set so firmly on Oxbridge, only those with a near certainty of getting in were allowed to take the entrance exam.

'That approach made me very disinclined to do anything in life unless I'm sure I can succeed,' said one of my contemporaries. 'There was a rather limited view of success and

achievement in our day, and I think it affected me - negatively,' said another. 'I don't think we were given much individual attention or personal care for our own needs,' added a third.

School students are now encouraged to think for themselves, to challenge what they are told, and to realise, for example, that there is more to history than remembering dates in the right order. One teacher's favourite mantra was: 'If you write in the exam what I have taught you, you will pass. If you do not, you will not.'

She returned tests that did not faithfully parrot her definition of rain-

fall. It never occurred to her that a better gauge of our understanding would have been the ability to define it in our own words.

Much is talked about grade inflation and falling standards. Indeed, if you were to compare our 1973 A-level results with those in 2013, it would seem that As and A\*s are now handed out more liberally.

But maybe teaching has just got better. Teachers are actually trained now to teach; very few of ours, especially in the early days, had received

any formal training and had a limited view of how to bring their subjects alive to adolescent girls. Girls routinely failed one, even two A levels. Does that really suggest academic rigour? What did the teachers think that they had been doing over two sixth-form years if they couldn't get their pupils through their chosen subjects? After all, when running records are broken, we don't think that 100m just got shorter, do we?

These are just a few observations and impressions. Most of us, however, are parents, who have been impressed by the quality of our children's education (some of them even pupils here or at the neighbouring boys' school). The world has become a more challenging place for youngsters than it was for us in 1973. Those of us who went to university (many fewer than today) were virtually guaranteed jobs, a different prospect from our children's, with their far starker results. 'The change is not unique to our school, or even to girls' schools in general,' said the education professor. 'It reflects a more general societal change in ideas about education and employment and especially a change in the role of higher education.'

Education has improved. It is child-centred, it recognises that adolescence is not just something to be got through quickly but to be harnessed to the future, and to be provoked, challenged and encouraged. Another contemporary said, 'I certainly found it a new and uncomfortable experience at college to be expected to think for myself and disagree with the theories of others. I would love to have been able to benefit from the facilities we saw on our

*'A revolution has taken place in my old school, in the style and delivery of education'*

tour of the school. They seemed much more relevant to real life.'

Yet the school, on purpose nameless, had done something over the 13 years it had us in its charge to cause 52 of us to turn up on a chilly May day to reminisce. Perhaps it is best summed up by the previous speaker, 'The happiness, security, enthusiasm and friendship that I found at school is enduring and irreplaceable.'

What is good about today's independent girls' schools is that they offer the best of both worlds. ■



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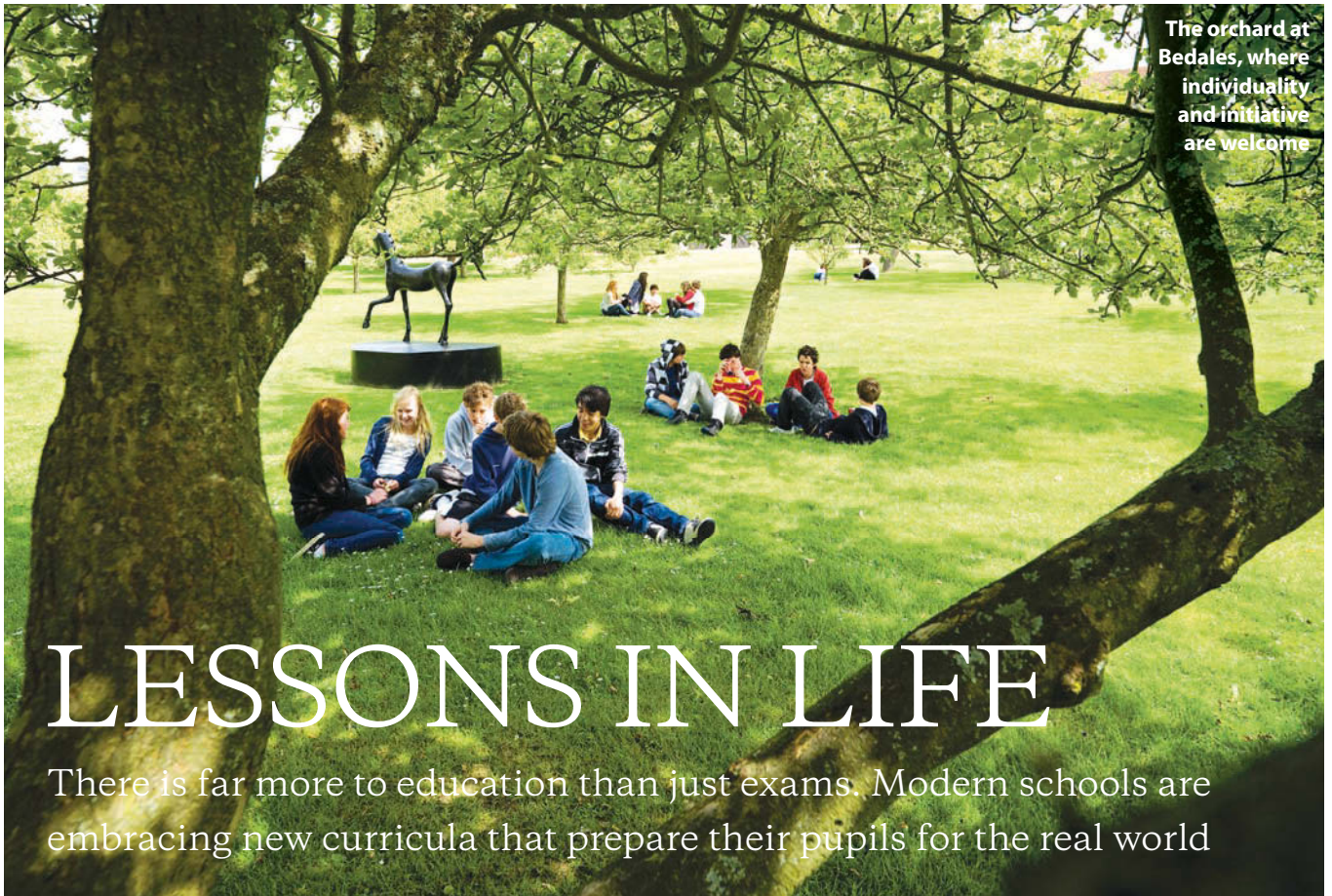
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# LESSONS IN LIFE

There is far more to education than just exams. Modern schools are embracing new curricula that prepare their pupils for the real world

**H**ilary French has an opportunity offered to few headmistresses. Next autumn, her current school, Central Newcastle High School, will merge with Newcastle-upon-Tyne Church High School to become Newcastle High School for Girls. The merger means she is able to create a new curriculum, embedding 'soft skills' within a demanding academic programme.

So what are soft skills? In essence, says Mrs French, 'they are all those things not specifically addressed in curriculum content in the past, where the focus has been on exams rather than how to do things.' Mrs French, who is president of the Girls' Schools Association (GSA), argues that students need to learn other skills such as leadership, assertiveness, dealing with people, working in teams, motivation, responding to criticism and writing reports. The latter ability is important for science students who may not have written an essay for five years when they leave university.

'Life skills are fed in throughout our curriculum, including interview training conducted by academic subject to help prepare students for university and their later working lives,' says Alice McNeill, head of Ampleforth College's theology department. 'There is obviously an expectation of

rigorous academic teaching, but preparing students for leading constructive lives and facing issues with confidence is an equally vital part of our ethos and curriculum.'

The importance of such skills is emphasised by Mylene Curtis, managing director of Fleet Tutors. 'We're increasingly being asked for training in interview skills and in self-presentation. We can also read personal statements for university. These statements need to come across authentically and it's good for applicants to be challenged in advance by someone who doesn't know them, rather than just by teachers and parents.'

With fees as much as £30,000 per year, most parents now expect schools to provide rather more than just basic examination technique, says Charlotte Noel, schools placement consultant at Gabbitas. She's sceptical that Mrs French's initiative is as radical as it sounds: in her view, independent schools have always taught these soft skills, even if they haven't specifically described them as such. 'Presentation, leadership and teamwork have always been taught in boys' schools,' adds Ralph Lucas, editor of *The Good Schools Guide*. 'It's in their DNA and part of that military tradition of being there for other chaps.'

Boarding gives more time for a wider range of activities. 'Full ▷

