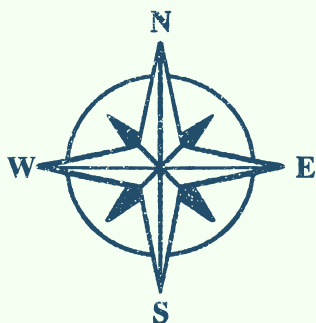


NAVIGATING SECONDARY SCHOOL APPLICATIONS WITH CONFIDENCE

Understanding schools.
Exploring your values.
Making confident decisions.



Joe Pardoe

Teacher, School Leader and
Founder, School Compass

Why this Handbook Exists

In October, 2021, my life changed - permanently and for the better. I was no longer just a teacher or school leader. I was also a dad.



Since becoming a parent I realised three things about the education system:

1. Information is sparse for parents like you, who want to know more about the system their child is entering into
2. The information that *is* available is often confusing, conflicting and disjointed
3. There is no independent, objective source of information - not influenced by school, council or government agenda

There is a gap and this makes things more difficult, more stressful and more time-consuming for you. The gap is filled with half-truths, gossip and overly-simplistic data.

This handbook is part of my mission to help bridge this gap - giving you the information and interpretation you deserve.

I can't tell you which school is best - no one can or should - Instead, I want to help you understand the system, explore your own values and make confident decisions for your child and your family.

I look forward to helping you navigate one of the most important journeys in your child's life!

Joe Pardoe

Founder of School Compass

How to Use This Handbook

This handbook is designed to help you navigate one of the most important decisions in your child's educational journey.

You do not need to read it from cover to cover in a single sitting. Some parents prefer to work through the handbook from beginning to end, while others dip into the sections most relevant to their situation.

The handbook is organised into three stages.

Understand: Build a clearer understanding of how the school system works, how admissions operate and the different types of schools available.

Investigate: Learn how to interpret school information, including inspection reports, published data and other sources of information.

Explore: Reflect on your own values, visit schools with purpose and make confident decisions about your preferences.

Throughout the handbook, you will encounter ideas, frameworks and questions designed to help you move beyond opinions, rankings and league tables.

The goal is not to identify a universally 'best' school. The goal is to identify the school that is the best fit for your child, your family and your values.

Note: I cannot give advice about which school is best for your child, nor be responsible for the decisions you make. The application process itself can also vary, so you should find out what is required for your particular context via your local authority website.

‘Choosing’ a Secondary School

For many parents, choosing a secondary school is one of the most significant decisions to grapple with within the education system.

It can feel overwhelming, stressful and high-pressured.

There are open evenings, league tables, Ofsted reports, websites, prospectuses, social media groups and opinions from friends and family. Everyone seems to have a view on what makes a "good" school.

The challenge is that there is no single, objective answer.

Different schools make different choices. They prioritise different things. What feels like a strength to one family may feel like a weakness to another.

This handbook is designed to help you move beyond opinions, rankings and assumptions. Rather than searching for the ‘best’ school, my aim is to help you:

- Understand how the system works
- Make sense of the information available
- Explore your own values and priorities
- Make informed decisions with confidence

Because ultimately, the goal is not to find the perfect school. The goal is to find the school that feels like the best fit for your child and your family.

Good luck.

OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER

PART ONE: UNDERSTAND

- The Reality of School Choice
- Understanding the Admissions Process
- Understanding Different Types of School
- Why There Is No Perfect School

PART TWO: INVESTIGATE

- Looking Beyond League Tables
- Understanding Inputs and Outputs
- Finding Reliable Information
- How to Use Ofsted Reports
- Making Sense of School Data

PART THREE: EXPLORE

- Exploring Your Values
- Visiting Schools with Purpose
- Comparing Schools Effectively
- Making Your Decision

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

- Final Thoughts
- Next Steps

About the Author

For nearly twenty years, I have worked in education as a teacher, school leader and consultant.

During that time, I have taught in schools in the UK and overseas, led curriculum and assessment across all age phases, supported schools and local authorities, contributed to published books on education and been invited to share my views on education policy at a national level (the photo is me giving evidence to the Education Select Committee in the House of Commons!)

These experiences gave me a deep understanding of how schools work from the inside.



Then, in 2021, I became a parent.

Almost overnight, I found myself looking at the education system through a completely different lens.

I realised that many parents are expected to make important decisions about their child's education with little support in understanding how the system actually works.

Schools, local authorities and government all provide information, but very few people help parents interpret it.

This handbook is the result of that realisation.

It combines my professional experience working within education with my personal experience navigating the system as a parent. **My aim is not to tell you which school is 'best', but to help you better understand the choices available, explore your own values and make confident decisions for your family.** I hope it helps.

PART ONE: UNDERSTAND

A clearer understanding
of schools, admissions
and educational
choices.



Why School Choice Isn't Really A Choice

One of the most important things to understand about the application process is that, despite the language we often use, parents rarely have complete 'choice'.

What we actually have is preference.

We can explore schools, visit open events, reflect on our values and submit an application. However, there will always be factors outside our control - whether that is catchment areas, admissions criteria, oversubscription or simple practicalities such as the daily commute. This can feel frustrating at first. Yet it is also a useful reminder that education is not a perfectly controllable process.

Even if you were offered a place at your ideal school, there is no guarantee your child's experience would unfold exactly as you hope. Learning is complex. Children are unique. Schools are dynamic organisations which change over time. Education is not predictable, controllable or straightforward.

There is, however, some good news. Research consistently suggests that schools are only one factor in a child's educational success. Other influences may be just as important - and in some cases, more important.

Some of these factors sit firmly within our control. Others we can influence. Others remain beyond our control.

Understanding the difference can be liberating. Rather than worrying about every possible outcome, we can focus our energy on the areas where we are most likely to make a positive difference. So, what does the research suggest are the factors which have the greatest influence on a child's educational success?

What Really Shapes a Child's Success?

There are many factors which contribute to the academic development and growth of young people. However, four main areas which emerge are...

Home culture and family life

Research consistently suggests that the home environment plays a significant role in a child's educational success.

In fact, factors such as parental expectations, attitudes towards learning, access to books, language development and family routines often have a greater influence on long-term outcomes than many parents realise.

Children who grow up in homes where learning is valued, effort is encouraged and curiosity is celebrated are more likely to thrive academically. This does not mean parents need to be experts, tutors or teachers. Rather, it is the everyday culture of the home that matters: reading together, talking about ideas, encouraging perseverance and showing an interest in learning.

Importantly, many of these factors sit within our control as parents.

Whilst we cannot control every aspect of our child's education, we can influence the environment they experience at home. We can foster a love of learning, encourage resilience, celebrate effort and create routines that support their development.

This is one reason why it is important to keep school choice in perspective. Schools matter, but they are only one part of a much bigger picture.

There are elements of this which **we can control as parents**.

What the Research says...

Studies consistently find that parental engagement is one of the strongest influences on educational outcomes.

The UK's Education Endowment Foundation estimates that effective parental engagement can add the equivalent of **several months of additional academic progress** over the course of a year. Every year.

Peers and friends

Another factor which can have a significant influence on a child's educational outcomes is their friendship group and wider peer network.

This becomes particularly important as children grow older. During adolescence, fitting in with peers is a powerful human instinct. Most of us can probably remember times when our friends influenced the clothes we wore, the hobbies we pursued or the decisions we made.

The same is true in education. Research suggests that young people are influenced by the attitudes, expectations and behaviours of those around them. If a child is surrounded by friends who value learning, work hard and have high aspirations for the future, they are more likely to adopt similar attitudes themselves. Of course, peer influence can work in the opposite direction too. Friendship groups can shape behaviour, motivation and attitudes towards school in both positive and negative ways.

As parents, we have some influence over this factor, but very little direct control. We can encourage positive friendships, create opportunities for children to meet like-minded peers and help them navigate social challenges. Ultimately, however, friendship groups develop through thousands of daily interactions that sit largely beyond our control.

What the Research says...

Studies have found that peer groups influence educational outcomes, behaviour and aspirations. Researchers have found that students are more likely to improve their achievement when surrounded by peers who have positive attitudes towards learning and high expectations for the future.

Individual teachers

Most of us can remember a teacher who made a lasting impression on our lives. Interestingly, this may not have been a teacher you initially liked!

Perhaps they believed in us when others did not. Perhaps they sparked an interest in a subject we had never considered before. Or perhaps they simply took the time to listen, encourage and challenge us to do our best. Research shows that teachers matter. In fact, teacher quality is one of the most important school-based factors influencing student outcomes.

However, teaching is ultimately a human relationship. Just as adults connect differently with different managers, colleagues and mentors, children connect differently with different teachers. A teacher who inspires one child may have a completely different impact on another.

This is one reason why education can be difficult to predict. There is no way of knowing in advance which teachers your child will connect with, and those relationships will naturally change over time. Importantly, this sits **almost entirely outside of your control as a parent.**

The good news is that every school contains a variety of teachers, personalities and role models. Whilst it is impossible to know which individual teachers your child will encounter during their educational journey, it is highly likely that they will meet one or more adults who encourage, inspire and challenge them to achieve more than they thought possible.

What the Research says...

Research suggests that teacher quality is one of the most important school-based influences on student achievement. Whilst schools matter, the impact of individual teachers can vary considerably, meaning that two children attending the same school may have very different experiences depending on the teachers they have.

The school

Finally, we arrive at the school itself. Schools do matter.

The culture of a school, the relationships within it, the quality of teaching, the curriculum, the expectations placed on pupils and the opportunities available all play an important role in shaping a child's educational experience.

This is why it is worth investing time in understanding schools and exploring the options available to your family. However, it is important to keep schools in perspective.

As we have seen, schools are only one factor influencing a child's development and educational success. They sit alongside the home environment, friendship groups and the individual teachers a child encounters along the way.

Unlike some of these factors, schools are something we can influence through our applications and preferences. Yet they are not something we can completely control. Admissions processes, availability of places and practical considerations all play a role.

Perhaps the most important lesson is a school is important, but it is not the same as determining a child's future. There is no perfect school and no guaranteed route to success.

The goal is not to find the perfect school. The goal is to find a school that feels like a good fit for your child, your family and your values.

What the Research says...

Schools make a difference to educational outcomes. However, schools are only one influence among many. Family environment, peer relationships and individual teachers all contribute to a child's experience and development.

A Note on Research

Throughout this handbook, I occasionally refer to educational research.

Whilst research can provide useful insights, it is important to remember that education is a complex field.

Children are different, schools are different and what works in one context may not work in another.

Most educational research either examines small groups of learners in specific settings or combines many studies to identify broader patterns.

Neither can tell us exactly what will work for your child.

It is also worth remembering that research often focuses on measurable outcomes, such as test scores and qualifications. You may value other outcomes just as highly, including happiness, confidence, creativity, friendships or wellbeing.

For these reasons, I encourage you to view research as one source of insight rather than a definitive answer.

Two more factors to consider...

Schools are dynamic, living communities. It is easy to think of a school as a fixed entity. In reality, schools are constantly changing.

Teachers join and leave. Leaders move on. New initiatives are introduced. Different year groups bring different strengths and challenges. Over time, all of these factors shape the culture and experience of a school.

This means that the school you visit during an open event will not be exactly the same school your child joins. Nor will it be the same school when they leave several years later.

Individuals matter, and over time they can have a significant influence on the culture of a school.

There is variation within any school. It is also important to remember that there is no such thing as a single school experience.

Whilst schools often talk about their vision, values and approach, each classroom is slightly different. Teachers bring their own personalities, strengths and interests. Different year groups can also develop their own character and culture.

As a result, two children attending the same school may have very different experiences. Your child will experience five different year groups, dozens of teachers and multiple leadership teams during their time at secondary school. In effect, multiple iterations of the same school.

This is one reason why it is important to be cautious when listening to stories from other parents. Their experience may be completely genuine, but it is still only one experience of a much larger organisation. This is not an exact science. Schools matter, but each child will experience them in their own unique way.

The Application Process

The application process can feel complicated at first, which is one reason why I recommend starting early. Familiarising yourself with the process can reduce stress later on.

It is also important to understand that the application process differs depending on whether you are applying for a state school or an independent school.

Before doing anything else, I strongly recommend finding and reading your Local Authority's admissions guidance.

Every Local Authority publishes information explaining how the application process works in their area, including key dates, admissions criteria and how places are allocated.

Whilst there are broad similarities across England, there are often important local differences.

Understanding the rules in your area will help you avoid confusion and ensure you focus your time and energy in the right places.

Many of the questions parents ask during the application process can be answered by carefully reading this guidance.

Only once you have done this should you begin exploring the finer details of individual schools.

Start Here

Before researching individual schools, visit your Local Authority's admissions website and download their admissions guidance. Even if you are considering moving house, applying for schools in a neighbouring authority or exploring independent school options, your Local Authority guidance is usually the best place to begin.

For **state schools**, the admissions process is usually managed by your Local Authority.

Whilst the details vary slightly between areas, the broad process is similar across England. Parents submit their preferences and places are then allocated according to the school's published admissions criteria.

A few things to remember:

- Applications are normally made through your home Local Authority, even if you are applying for schools located in a different authority.
- Each Local Authority publishes its own admissions guidance, deadlines and procedures. Always check the details for your area.
- School places are not usually allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. Meeting the deadline is important, but submitting your application early does not normally increase your chances of being offered a place.
- If you are considering schools in neighbouring Local Authorities, it is worth understanding how the admissions arrangements work in both areas.
- Most importantly, remember that the process is based on preference rather than choice. Listing a school as your first preference does not guarantee a place if the school is oversubscribed.

Once applications have been submitted, Local Authorities allocate places according to the published admissions criteria. Understanding how these criteria work is one of the most important parts of the application process, which we will explore next.

For **independent schools**, the admissions process is usually managed directly by the school itself rather than the Local Authority.

This means that the process can vary significantly from one school to another, so it is important to research each school's requirements carefully.

A few things to remember:

- Most independent schools have a dedicated admissions team who can guide you through the process and answer questions.
- Application deadlines, admissions criteria and assessment processes vary considerably between schools.
- In addition to fees, some schools may use assessments, interviews, reference requests or taster sessions as part of their admissions process.
- Some schools operate waiting lists and may accept applications several years in advance, whilst others have a more straightforward annual admissions cycle.
- Fees are only one consideration. It is also worth exploring the school's values, culture, curriculum and approach to education to ensure it feels like a good fit for your child and your family.

As with state schools, it is important to remember that there is no universally 'best' school.

Independent schools vary considerably in their ethos, priorities and approach, so taking time to understand what matters most to your family remains just as important as understanding the admissions process itself.

The State Application Process

One of the most important things to understand about the state school system is that parents express **preferences**, rather than making a direct choice.

This can feel frustrating at first. After all, if you have carefully researched schools and decided which one you would like your child to attend, why can't you simply choose it?

The answer is largely practical.

Schools have a limited number of places. There are only so many classrooms, teachers and spaces available. If every family applying for a school could automatically secure a place, some schools would quickly become oversubscribed.

Imagine a school has 100 places available.

If 100 families list that school as their first preference, everyone can be offered a place.

However, if 150 families list the school as their first preference, there are simply not enough places for everyone. In these situations, the school and Local Authority must apply an admissions policy to determine which children will be offered places.

This is why the system is based on preferences rather than choices.

Each school has a published admissions policy which explains how places will be allocated if more children apply than there are places available.

While the exact details vary between schools and Local Authorities, the criteria commonly include factors such as...



Children in the care system (Looked After Children - LAC). Children who are currently in care, or who were previously in care, are usually given the highest priority in admissions policies.



Children with a 'named school' on an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP). Children whose Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) names a specific school will usually be offered a place at that school. **NOTE: The EHCP is a complex, legal document which requires many levels of assessment - this is not a 'diagnosis' of a special educational need (SEN).**



Children with a sibling already attending the school. Many schools give priority to children who already have an older sibling attending the school. This helps families keep children together and can make school runs much easier.



Children who attend a 'feeder' school. In some cases, primary schools may have 'feeder' pre-schools (although, this is not as common as it used to be - so check your context). If a child attends a feeder primary school, they may have priority. Always check the admissions policy carefully, as feeder arrangements vary considerably between areas.



Children who live in the 'catchment area'. As a general rule of thumb, the closer you live to the school, the more likely it is you will be offered a place. However, there are many ways of calculating 'catchment' (check your context) and be careful not to assume that 'catchment areas' are fixed boundaries. In many areas they change each year depending on the number and location of applicants.



Other requirements. Some schools, for example, may require proof of faith. Single-sex schools and selectives schools are very rare at (state) primary level, but you may encounter this in the private sector.

Each year, the cohort of applicants will change: there will be greater or fewer 'first choice' preferences; the number of siblings, pupils with an EHCP and Looked After Children will vary. There is no real way to 'guarantee' you are allocated the school (or schools) you desire.

Recap so far...



You do not have complete control over the school your child attends. All options will involve elements beyond your control. You have a preference.



Schools are only one factor which contribute to a child's academic success. The biggest predictor of student achievement is the home environment so most students will thrive in any school on your list.



Schools are dynamic organisations which can (and do) change a lot. There is also a lot of variation *within* each school.

Remember...



The application process for state schools is usually managed by the Local Authority. Each is slightly different, so you **must check the details in your local area. Give yourself as much time as possible to make yourself familiar with the process and get questions clarified (in writing) as far in advance as you can.**

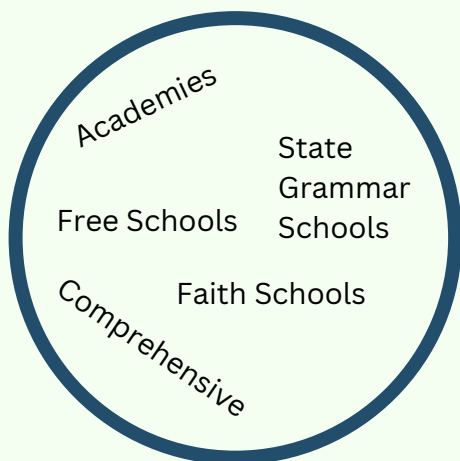
The School System

One reason many parents find the school system confusing is that there are several different ways of categorising schools.

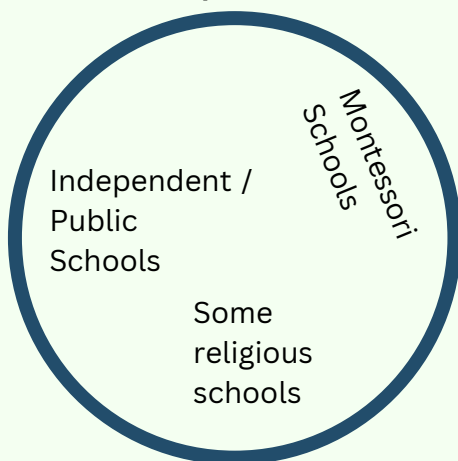
Schools can be grouped by - who funds them, who runs them, whether they charge fees and whether they select pupils.

This page provides a simplified overview of some of the most common school types.

State

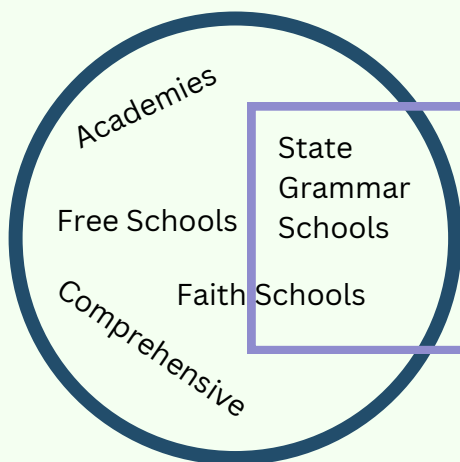


Independent

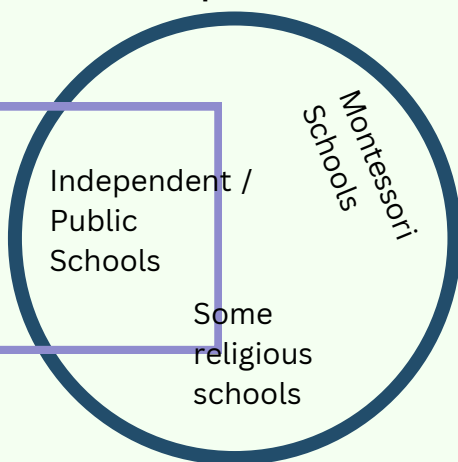


The next broad category to add, is 'barrier to entry'. Some schools in each bucket will have a method of selection...

State



Independent



The School System

The final layer to add is who is responsible / accountable for the running and performance of the school. There are three main categories (although, there are more in the system - for example, some faith schools may also be part of a diocese etc). These are as demonstrated below with approximate % based on recent data.

	Funded	% of schools	% of pupils	Accountability	Curriculum
 Local Authority / Maintained School	Central Government > Local Authority > School	 50%	 42%	Local Authority	National Curriculum
 Free School / Academy	Central Government > School	 40%	 52%	Multi-Academy Trust CEO / Regional School Commissioner	School / Multi-Academy Trust designed
 Independent Schools	Customer > School	 9%	 6%	Board	School designed

What does this mean for YOU?

The diagrams on the previous pages show just how complex the school system can be. Fortunately, you do not need to become an expert in school governance to make a good decision for your child!

However, there are three important insights worth remembering...

1. School Labels Only Tell Part Of The Story

Terms such as Academy, Maintained School and Independent School tell you something about how a school is funded, governed and held accountable.

They do not tell you how behaviour is managed, how lessons are taught, how happy pupils are, how ambitious the curriculum is or whether the school will be a good fit for your child

Always investigate the individual school rather than relying on its category - being a particular type of school does not determine the education provision.

2. Accountability Matters

It is useful to understand where responsibility ultimately sits.

For Local Authority schools, accountability sits with the Local Authority and elected councillors.

For Academies, accountability usually sits with the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). If you are considering an Academy, it is often worth exploring the Trust website as well as the school's website. Schools within the same Trust may share behaviour policies, curriculum approaches and values.

3. Curriculum Matters

All schools must teach a broad curriculum.

However, Local Authority schools are required to follow the National Curriculum, whilst Academies have greater freedom to design their own curriculum. Independent schools have even fewer restrictions.

This doesn't mean a one approach is automatically better.

The key question is - what does this school choose to do with that freedom?

If curriculum is important to you, look beyond the headline subjects and explore what pupils are actually learning.

Key Takeaway

The category of school is only the starting point. The individual school, its leadership, culture and curriculum are usually far more important.

There is no 'Perfect School'

One of the biggest misconceptions in school admissions is the belief that there is a single 'best' school waiting to be discovered.

In reality, every school has strengths and weaknesses. Every school makes trade-offs. Every school serves different pupils and families. And every child will experience a school slightly differently.

The goal is not to find the perfect school. The goal is to find a school which is a good fit for your child, your family and your values.

The Pros and Cons

Over the next few pages, we will explore some of the common advantages and disadvantages associated with different types of schools and school characteristics.

As you read, remember:

These are not 'good versus bad' choices. They are trade-offs.

For example:

A large school may offer more opportunities, but can sometimes feel less personal.

A small school may provide a stronger sense of community, but fewer subject choices.

A faith school may provide a strong shared ethos, but may feel less aligned with some families.

A selective school may provide a highly academic environment, but may not be the right fit for every child.

Understanding these trade-offs is often more helpful than searching for a perfect answer.

As you work through these examples, think back to the values and priorities you identified earlier in the guide.

The same feature which one family sees as a strength may be viewed as a weakness by another.

That does not mean one family is right and the other is wrong.

It simply reflects the fact that education involves choices, compromises and differing views about what matters most.

(Feel free to skip any school you are not considering or is not available in your area!)

Non-Selective (academically) state schools / Comprehensives

Pros

- They are free at point of use
- They are usually made-up of a diverse cross-section of society, exposing children to a wide range of people and perspectives
- There is usually no (or very low) barrier to entry
- Teachers hone their skills through teaching a wide-variety of students of varying abilities
- There is usually a big focus on inclusion

Cons

- They can be stretched for resources
- They usually have bigger class-sizes (compared to the independent sector)
- They can be more restrained with curriculum - although academies do have more flexibility
- They reflect a broader cross-section of society, bringing together students from a wide range of backgrounds, interests and experiences.
- Like lots of schools, there will be pressure for exam success - in this case to ensure a strong position on league tables
- There can be lots of variation in the system - both in terms of quality and approach.

Wider society

The idea of non-selective state education is to provide a level playing field for anyone to thrive. They should be microcosms of society - allowing young people to grow accustomed to their peers. If all schools were like this, and there was no preference, we would probably have a highly effective school system.

Grammar Schools (academically selective state schools)

Pros

- They are usually free at point of use
- They are academically selective, so will usually have an academic culture
- They usually have a culture of 'leadership'
- As all children have a proven 'academic ability', students will have peers who are similar to them

Cons

- They can be stretched for resources
- They usually have bigger class-sizes (compared to the independent sector)
- The academic nature can create a culture of competition and a fear of failure
- There is a danger of developing a 'fixed mindset' - 'I am clever so I don't need to try hard'
- They can create a 'them/us' mentality with students from non-selective schools
- If your child does not pass the 11+ exam, this might have an impact on their self-esteem and aspirations
- They are concentrated in certain areas - there are only 160 in the country. Most parents don't have this option

Wider society

Some research suggests that grammar schools may have a negative impact on social mobility and wider educational outcomes, particularly for students who do not gain a place. Students who attend these schools would likely have achieved the same outcomes, but as these schools 'suck' the more academically able from their local non-selective schools, students who do not get in are negatively affected. A tutoring market has developed further widening the economic divide in education.

Independent Schools

Pros

- Usually small class size
- Usually well resourced
- Can be a great source of networks and these are increasingly international
- Often have a strong ethos of arts and sports
- Can have more flexibility in the curriculum
- You are a customer!
- Scholarships may be available for those who can't afford to pay

Cons

- They are increasingly expensive
- Usually a very narrow cross section of society
- Can be quite competitive
- If there is a selection process, can be difficult if your child doesn't get in
- Often added hidden expenses - trips, uniform etc
- Might not be very inclusive
- Independent schools need to be financially sustainable (good education is a means not an end)
- Class sizes might not be as small as you imagine

Wider society

Independent schools remove engaged families out of the state sector (both good and bad). This, in some ways, has a positive effect as those who can pay fees have already paid taxes (meaning more resources for those in state schools) - however, like with grammar schools, they are a net negative for the system. They can be socially divisive - only around 6% of students attend but are massively overrepresented (politics, law, journalism etc)

Single-Sex Schools

Pros

- Students are with peers who are at a similar developmental stage to themselves - there are some differences between males and female development phases (although, this is of course a spectrum)
- Some research suggests that girls are more likely to choose and engage in science, maths and technology subjects
- Both sexes tend to report better enjoyment of sport
- Girls schools tend to perform better academically (although, the research here is light and distorted by the fact that most single-sex schools are grammar/independent)

Cons

- There is no evidence (generally) that academic performance is improved in single-sex settings
- Boys tend to benefit less than girls in a single-sex setting
- Students who attend mix-sex settings report higher satisfaction with their educational experience
- It may require more parental involvement to ensure the child is socialised with the opposite sex
- There are studies which report that both sexes have poorer mental health if they attend a single-sex school (although, as always, there are flaws)
- Some families question whether single-sex education reflects the environments students will encounter later in modern life.

Wider society

Research suggests that the more mixed a school environment, the better it is for all students. Parents are more likely to send their child to an all-girls school than an all-boys school which alters the demographic make-up of the surrounding comprehensive schools. As girls tend to perform better academically, all-girls schools can have a knock-on effect on the league table performance of non-selective schools

Faith-Based Schools

Pros

- Students may learn alongside a higher proportion of peers who share similar religious beliefs and values.
- The ethos of the school may fit with your values and have a more holistic aim
- Faith schools tend to perform better academically (but this may be more down to the 'selectiveness' of the schools and the fact that a lot of faith schools are private/grammar schools

Cons

- There may not be as much interaction with students of other faiths
- Depending on the school, the approach may mean students feel less able to explore their own identity and see examples of other identities without judgement
- There is a huge spectrum - from highly prescriptive independent schools with a strict religious aspect, to state Church of England schools with no admissions restrictions

Wider society

Whilst Church of England schools tend not to have selection criteria, other religious schools may require you to demonstrate a commitment to faith - this requires parents to be proactive in their child's education which can act as an unofficial bar to entry. This means that these schools tend to have the more engaged parents - meaning that local non-selective schools lose these parents and pupils.

Big Schools (lots of students)

Pros

- As funding is 'per-pupil' and efficiencies can be made at scale, bigger schools may have (slightly) more financial freedom
- Big schools usually break down into much smaller cohorts (year groups, houses, tutor groups). Even though they can seem daunting at first, it might not feel so 'big' when everything is settled
- Big schools tend to have more staff - so generally more expertise in the teaching body
- This also usually means more choice and flexibility when choosing GCSE options
- Big schools have a diverse student body - groups tend to emerge, potentially meaning children have more chance to 'discover' their identity and passions
- There will be lots of people to contact to find out about your child

Cons

- In a big school, not all teachers will know all pupils - there can be less of a 'family' feel (although, in the smaller units, this will still exist)
- There will be lots of adults, but they may only know a fraction of your child
- Because of the above, it can be difficult to form strong relationships
- There will likely be many channels of communication perhaps making it incoherent

Wider society

There are no major implications. However, larger schools tend to be cheaper to run but offer less choice as a whole within the system.

Small Schools (less students)

Pros

- Your child is more likely to be 'known' by most staff in the school
- They can have a family feel
- More staff will know more about your child
- The teachers will be able to develop stronger relationships more quickly
- Smaller schools may be structurally less complex - making them easier to communicate with

Cons

- Fewer teachers means that there will be less widespread expertise in the school
- There will be fewer teachers - meaning the impact of each teacher is greater (this could be good or bad!)
- There will likely be less options of extra-curricular activities (you need enough staff and students to make these work)
- There will likely be less choice and flexibility at GCSE
- There will be less of a diversity of students for a child to make friends with - less exposure to different personalities and perspectives

Wider society

There are no major implications. However, smaller schools increase the diversity of approach and choice in the system - but tend to be more expensive.

The End of the Beginning

When you first started thinking about applying for secondary schools, it may have felt overwhelming. There were probably dozens of questions running through your mind...

Which schools should we look at? How does the admissions process work? What if we make the wrong decision? How can I tell what a school is really like?

Hopefully, you are already starting to see that the process is not quite as mysterious as it first appeared.

You may also have realised something important - there is no such thing as a perfect school.

Every school has strengths and weaknesses. Every school makes trade-offs. And every child will experience school in their own unique way. The goal is not to find the perfect school.

The goal is to make a thoughtful, informed decision based on your child's needs, your family's values and the information available to you.

You should also now have a clearer understanding of what you can control, what you can influence and what sits beyond your control. This allows you to focus your time and energy where it will have the greatest impact.

Of course, this is only the beginning - you may even have discovered new questions that you did not know to ask when you started this journey! We will address these over the coming pages.

In the next section, we will explore the data available about schools, where to find it, how to interpret it and - most importantly - how to avoid some of the common mistakes parents make when using it.

PART TWO: INVESTIGATE

How to investigate
schools with confidence
and make sense of the
information available.



Information About Schools

By now, you should have a much clearer understanding of how the school system works, the admissions process and some of the key trade-offs involved in education.

The next step is to begin investigating the schools you are considering.

Most parents quickly discover that there is no shortage of information available. School websites, Ofsted reports, performance data, social media, open days, league tables and local recommendations can all provide useful insights.

The challenge is rarely finding information.

The challenge is knowing which information matters, how much weight to give it and how to interpret it in context.

In this section, we will explore some of the most common sources of information available to parents, along with their strengths, limitations and common pitfalls.

The aim is not to tell you what to think.

The aim is to help you understand what you are seeing and make decisions with greater confidence.

However, before getting into the details, it is worth us zooming out a little to look at THREE things parents are never told about this data.

Let's zoom out...

Side Effects

Before exploring school data, and how to use it effectively, I want to start by introducing two key factors - I will use medicine as an example to illustrate both. The first of these is 'side effects'.

As you know, when it comes to medicine, there are rigorous, large-scale randomised control trials. This process is designed to 1) test the intervention has a positive impact and 2) to uncover any potential negative side-effects.

This empowers you as a user. You know that taking a pill will probably cure your headache, but it comes with the risk of an upset stomach.

Education is not like this. There are lots of reasons why and it is a complex area - but for you, as a parent, this has tangible consequences: education is not good at presenting the potential negative side-effects to an approach.

How should you use this information? Remember, all schools are limited by resources and time. They will all deploy time and resources differently. This will result in a mix of positive outcomes. The schools will likely tell you about the positives! 'Exam results are top in the area', 'all children play an instrument' or 'we invest heavily in wellbeing programmes'.

Whenever I see a 'positive' - the question I always ask is, what is NOT happening to make this happen? You may decide that the school with amazing exam outcomes - at the expense of wellbeing, extra-curricular activities and a broad curriculum - is not the type of education you want.

Every positive, comes with a corresponding negative...

Exceptional exam results may come at the expense of curriculum breadth. Extensive enrichment programmes may mean fewer resources elsewhere. A highly structured environment may provide clarity but reduce flexibility.

Inputs as well as Outputs

The second factor to consider is 'inputs' as well as 'outputs'. Most of the information you are presented as a parent relates to 'outputs' - but this data is as effective if you are not also presented with the 'inputs'. Again, I will explain using medicine.

Imagine there are two hospitals in your local area. Hospital A has strong cure rates - almost everyone who attends leaves feeling better. It is talked about highly on local forums and the premises and marketing materials are very professional.

Hospital B, on the other hand, achieves only mixed outcomes - while some leave cured, others do not. The reviews on forums are mixed - some love the hospital, while others have many complaints. The look of the building and how they present themselves is a bit amateur.

You might deduce from this information that: Hospital A is better; If you go to hospital A, you will probably be cured, but if you go to Hospital B, you probably won't; The doctors in Hospital A are better.

However, now let's look at the inputs. Hospital A only accepts patients who pass health test. This health test is repeated each year - if you fail, you are not allowed to stay. It is only for those who pay, are under 45 and have never smoked or drank alcohol. Do you still have the same assumptions? Does it really have the best doctors or processes? In fact, what kind of doctor would apply to work in this hospital?

Hospital B, encourages all in the local community to attend - no matter how sick. There are no barriers to entry. Is this really a worse hospital? Is Hospital A genuinely better? Or is it serving a different group of patients?

Inputs as well as Outputs

What 'inputs' should you look for? Each context will be different, however, there are some general patterns which may help...



Barriers to entry. The obvious one here is, if the school only takes children who are good at passing tests, you would expect their exam outcomes to be strong! However, any *barrier* to entry can mean that parents have to be more engaged - children from families who value education tend to do better (so, think the parents who work hard to get their child into a Catholic school...)



Number of pupils on Free School Meals (FSM):

Although I personally dislike this measure, Free School Meals (FSM) is often used as a rough indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. Schools serving more disadvantaged communities may face additional challenges which can influence published attainment data. This does not necessarily tell you anything about the quality of teaching within the school.



Balance of gender: Nationally, girls tend to achieve slightly higher outcomes than boys on many educational measures. As a result, schools with a significantly different gender balance may produce different overall results. At primary level, this is unlikely to be a factor as almost all are mixed.



Number of pupils with Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) or a diagnosed Special Educational Need (SEN):

All learning needs are different, but at a national scale, students who have additional needs tend to not perform as strongly on pressurised, high-stakes exams. This does not mean these schools are less effective. In many cases they are supporting children with a broader range of needs.



English as an Additional Language (EAL): Some schools serve large numbers of pupils who speak English as an additional language. This can influence attainment data, particularly in younger year groups. However, these schools often develop significant expertise in supporting language acquisition and working with diverse communities.



Pupil Mobility: Some schools experience high numbers of pupils joining or leaving throughout the school year. For example, schools situated near military bases or with large Traveller communities. This can make curriculum planning and assessment more challenging, particularly if children arrive having studied different content elsewhere. High mobility may influence published outcomes and should be considered when interpreting school data.



Attendance: Attendance has one of the strongest relationships with educational outcomes. Schools serving communities with lower attendance rates may face additional challenges when supporting pupil progress. When looking at attainment data, it can be helpful to consider attendance alongside it, as the two are often closely linked.

It is a piece of the jigsaw puzzle...

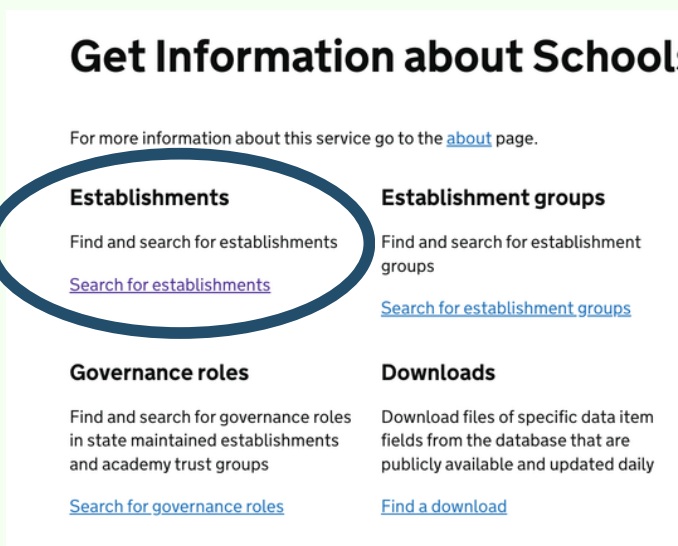
Over the next few pages, you'll learn where to find all of this data and more. But remember, it is all a peice of the puzzle. I don't look at any of these measures as red-flags - at all. But what I do is look at the output data and the input data as a way of making sense of what I am seeing. Very often, there is not as much difference between schools as you might think - but who attends the school can vary a lot.

How to Find Published Data

There is actually quite a lot of useful data published about schools. However, it is not well-publicised and most of it is hidden in complex, jargon-filled sites!

The best place to start is by visiting Get Information About Schools: <http://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk>

You will see the following...



Source: UK Government - Get Information About Schools (GIAS).

If you click on 'Establishments' you can search for a specific school or a specific location. It will bring up lots of information about the school.

You can see what 'type' of school it is, the Local Authority, if it has any specific admissions criteria and the link to the Trust (if it is an academy). You can also find out how many pupils are 'on roll' and compare it to the 'school capacity' - this will tell you how 'full' the school is. You can also see how many pupils are FSM and (usually) how many students have an SEN (but there are other ways to find this if it is not displayed).

Ofsted

www.reports.ofsted.gov.uk is best way to search for Ofsted reports. Once you have selected the school, you will see the grading. **Inadequate** is the lowest grade, then **Requires Improvement**, then **Good** then **Outstanding**. You can also find the link to the 'full report'. (Recent reports may not have an overall grade displayed)

What is Ofsted?

I am sure you are already aware of the work of Ofsted, but if not, they are a body with a wide-ranging remit to regulate and inspect children's services. You will most likely encounter them through the 'Ofsted Grading' which all state institutions will have and the accompanying 'Ofsted Reports' which they write.

Ofsted carry out 'no-notice' (actually, usually 24hours notice is given) inspections of schools. A number of inspectors (usually one to five) will visit the school. One will usually be directly employed as a Civil Servant as an 'His Majesty's Inspectorate' (HMI). The others will be contracted on an inspection by inspection basis.

Before the inspection, there will be a meeting with the headteacher to find out the context of the school. When they arrive, Ofsted have the power to speak to anyone, visit anywhere and investigate any document.

The inspection will usually last for two days - but some of this time, the inspectors will be writing-up, collecting evidence and feeding back to school leadership. At the end of the inspection, the headteacher and governing body will be made aware of the outcome - but this is not published for a few months (longer if the school appeals).

Ofsted

Ofsted reports can be useful, but they should be viewed as one source of information among many.

How to use an Ofsted Report and Grade

Ofsted are a useful source of information about schools. The inspections are written by experienced school leaders who visit many schools. Their perspective is helpful.

I would use the Ofsted Report to formulate questions which you want to investigate further - rather than seeing it as an objective, definitive review of the school.

A few things to remember are:

- Ofsted provides a snapshot of a school. They miss a lot more than they see during the visit
- Inspectors spend a relatively short time in a school. While they are experienced professionals, no inspection can capture every aspect of school life
- Because of this, there is an element of chance - if they had spoken to x student instead of y student, or visited Miss A's class instead of Mr B's lesson
- People have different views about what makes a great school. An inspector's perspective can be valuable, but it may not align perfectly with your own priorities and values.
- Some schools have not been inspected for many years. A lot can happen in a relatively short space of time
- The Report and Grade do not tell you anything about what you / your child will experience - 'Outstanding' does not guarantee that your child will get an 'Outstanding' education

Compare School Performance

The next site we can explore is www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk

Whilst the previous website focused on basic information about the school, this site contains much more detailed information about pupil outcomes, attendance, staffing and finances.

As with all school data, remember to consider both the inputs and the outputs before drawing conclusions.

Once again, you can search for a school. When you have selected the school, you will then see the following screen...

The screenshot shows a vertical list of four tabs, each with a title, a brief description, and a 'View' button. The tabs are: 'Secondary' (describing final results for key stage 4), '16 to 18' (describing final results for the 16 to 18 phase), 'Absence and pupil population' (describing absence rates and pupil numbers), and 'Workforce and finance' (describing teacher and support staff numbers, income, and spending).

Tab Title	Description	Action
Secondary	These are the final results for pupils who completed key stage 4 in the summer of 2023, except where stated otherwise.	View
16 to 18	These are the final results for students who reached the end of their 16 to 18 phase of education in the 2022 to 2023 academic year except where stated otherwise.	View
Absence and pupil population	This includes absence rates, pupil numbers and information on pupils attending the school.	View
Workforce and finance	This includes information on the numbers of teachers and support staff, school income and spending.	View

Source: UK Government - Compare School Performance.

Workforce and Finance: This section provides information about staffing, spending and resources. You can see, for example, staff-to-pupil ratios, the number of Teaching Assistants employed and how the school's funding is being used.

Absence and Pupil Population: This section provides useful information about the school's context and pupil demographics, including attendance, Free School Meals (FSM), Special Educational Needs (SEN) and other factors which may influence published outcomes.

'16 to 18': If the school also has a sixth form provision, this tab is where you can find the exam results at A Level.

'Secondary'

If you click the 'Secondary' tab, this will bring up the following page...

Progress 8 score ?

The academic progress that pupils make from the end of key stage 2 to the end of key stage 4. This is based on 8 qualifications.

The banding for this school or college is 'well above average' because the score is greater than or equal to 0.5, and the entire confidence interval is above 0.

Banding

WELL ABOVE AVERAGE

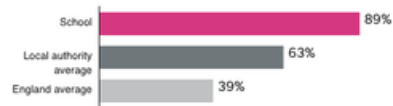
Score 0.74

Confidence interval ? 0.59 to 0.89

- ▶ [More information about this score](#)
- ▶ [Local authority and England scores](#)
- ▶ [How many state-funded mainstream schools are in each banding?](#)

Entering EBacc ?

A pupil is considered to have entered for the English Baccalaureate if they entered for qualifications in English, maths, sciences, a language and either history or geography.



Staying in education or entering employment ?

This shows the number of pupils who either stayed in education or went into employment after finishing key stage 4 (after year 11, usually aged 16).



Grade 5 or above in English & maths GCSEs ?

This tells you the percentage of pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs.



Attainment 8 ?

Schools get a score based on how well pupils have performed in up to 8 qualifications.



EBacc average point score ?

The EBacc average points score calculates a pupil's average point scores across the 5 pillars of the English Baccalaureate.



At first glance, this information can feel overwhelming. The good news is that you do not need to understand every number on the page. Over the next few pages, we will focus on the measures which are most useful - and some of the common mistakes parents make when interpreting them.

Secondary Exam Data

Progress 8: This is generally the most used academic measure for secondary schools. It attempts to show how much progress pupils make between the end of primary school and their GCSEs. The 'progress' is measured from the child's SATs results at the end of primary school. The '8' refers to the number of subjects which count in this measure: English and Maths are double weighted and then the best four other 'approved' qualifications. This is then calculated compared to other schools with 'similar demographics' (not necessarily the local schools) and a number is generated: a '0' means the students make exactly the expected level of progress on average. A plus number means they make more than expected levels of progress and a negative number means they make, on average, less progress compared to pupils in similar schools.

Entering 'EBacc': This tells you what percentage of pupils take exams in at least: English, Maths, Science a language and either History or Geography. These are considered to be the more 'academic' subjects (you may disagree with this!).

Staying in education or entering employment: This does exactly what it says. Young people are legally required to be in either education or on an apprenticeship until age 18 - so this number will usually be very high.

Grade 5 or above in English and maths: A grade 5 is considered to be a 'strong pass' in English and Maths - if a child achieves at least this grade in both subjects, then they have the minimum required qualification for most of their next steps.

Attainment 8: This is similar to 'Progress 8', but is not based on 'progress' - in other words just how well students performed (no matter their starting point). This is likely to be high in the more selective schools (although, progress might not be so strong).

EBacc average point score: This tells you (in a complex way!) how students performed on average across the 'EBacc' subjects.

Other Exam Data

Underneath the exam data we have already explored, you can find the following options...

Subjects entered at key stage 4	>
Results by pupil characteristics	>
EBacc additional measures	>
Progress 8 and Attainment 8 score by subject areas	>
Additional entry and achievement measures	>
Pupil destinations (2021 leavers)	>

These pages are more complex and many parents will choose not to explore them in detail.

However, there can be interesting things to explore on these pages - particularly if some of the characteristics are similar to your context.

There is one tab which is worth a closer look the: ‘Subjects entered at key stage 4’ button.

If you click this button, it will tell you how many students sat exams in each subject. This will give you a flavour of the types of exam options which will be available for your child. For example, some schools offer a fairly narrow menu of qualifications whilst other schools offer a broad range of subjects and qualification types.

This is usually helpful to start thinking about so that to reduce the chance of a major surprise when your child enters Year 9 and begins the options process (some schools start this at Year 8).

The Limitations of the Data

As you can see, there is a huge amount of published data available about schools. This information can be useful and can help you ask better questions.

However, it is important to understand that all data has limitations. Before drawing conclusions about a school, there are a few things worth remembering.

- The data is based on averages. It tells you how groups of pupils performed, not how any individual child experienced the school. It does not tell you anything about what your child's experience might be.
- The data does not show the full range of performance within a school. For example, a pupil may be an exceptional creative writer but struggle with spelling and grammar assessments. Another may excel in arithmetic but find problem-solving more challenging.
- Much of the data is backwards-looking. It tells you how pupils performed in the past, often after several years of schooling. Your child may not sit the same assessments for another five, six or even seven years. A great deal can change in that time.
- School data is influenced by the characteristics of the pupils attending the school. As we explored in the previous section, factors such as admissions criteria, attendance, levels of disadvantage and special educational needs can all influence outcomes.
- Learning is rarely neat, linear or predictable. Children develop at different rates, have different strengths and face different challenges. Any attempt to reduce this complexity to a small number of statistics will always have limitations.

- As with investing, past performance does not guarantee future results. A school that performed strongly last year may not necessarily perform strongly in the future, and vice versa.
- The 'progress' measures are based on performance at age 11 in literacy and numeracy tests. Learning is very rarely uniform or linear. The Year 6 SATs data is also used as the baseline for ALL secondary subjects - even though there are no SATs in history, art, computer science etc.

The key message is not that school data should be ignored.

Rather, school data should be viewed as one source of information among many. It can help you identify patterns, ask questions and investigate further, but it cannot provide a complete picture of a school. In the next section, we will explore something equally important: what the data does not tell you.

What the Data Doesn't Tell You

The published data tells you how pupils performed in a small number of standardised assessments.

This information can be useful. However, some of the most important aspects of a school are either difficult to measure or not measured at all.

For example, the data does not tell you:

- Whether children are happy at the school
- Whether they feel safe and supported
- The quality of relationships between staff and pupils
- How effectively the school communicates with families
- Whether children enjoy coming to school
- The breadth of trips, clubs and enrichment opportunities available
- Whether pupils learn an instrument, perform in productions or represent the school in sport

- How well the school supports children's wellbeing
- The quality of friendships and peer relationships
- How confident, resilient and independent pupils become over time

Nor does the data tell you much about the day-to-day experience of attending the school.

What does breaktime feel like?

How do teachers speak to pupils?

How do pupils speak to one another?

What happens when a child is struggling?

How welcoming is the school community?

These questions matter. Yet they cannot easily be captured in a spreadsheet or league table.

Education is a human endeavour. It is complex, messy and deeply personal. Whilst data can help us understand some aspects of a school, it can never fully capture the experience of being part of it.

This is why the most effective parents use data as a starting point, not an end point.

The data helps us identify questions.

You still need to investigate the school itself - this is where you can put my school visit guide to good use during open events.

Next on our journey, we are going to do something you will not find anywhere else - we are going to dive into your educational values...

School Data Check-List

- ☐ Check the admissions process in your local area
- ☐ What type of school is it? eg. Local Authority (Maintained) or Academy
- ☐ If it is an Academy, which Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) is it part of? Explore the Trust website.
- ☐ Does it have a selective admissions process? Is there a religious requirement?
- ☐ Does the school have a sixth form? Is this something you care about?
- ☐ Who is the headteacher? What can you learn about their background, priorities and vision for the school? Check Linkedin and do a Google Search
- ☐ What is the school capacity? How does this compare with the number of pupils on roll?
- ☐ What is the Ofsted Grade? When was it last inspected? Read the report.
- ☐ How well does the school perform on exam measures compared to other schools in the area and nationally?
- ☐ From the pupils demographic data, get a sense of the 'inputs': gender balance, SEN, FSM and EHCPs
- ☐ Have a look at the finance and workforce data - is there anything here which you want to investigate further?
- ☐ Check the admissions process in your local area!

PART THREE: EXPLORE

There is no perfect school. Only the school that best fits your family's values and priorities.



Your Child's Education Is Bigger Than School

Before you start comparing schools, it is worth pausing to think about something important - schools are only one (quite small) part of your child's overall education education.

We have to distinguish between three words which are used interchangeably, but which mean quite different things.

Learning: Learning is something all living organisms do. We are all learning, all of the time. It is haphazard. It is directionless. It isn't driven by values. You can learn right things and wrong things, bad things and good things.

Importantly, it is personal. Every single person reading this book has their own unique learning journey.

Education: This is where it gets interesting. Education is something (to my knowledge) only humans do. It is the deliberate structuring of learning experience with the aim of taking us from one point to another. The word curriculum actually comes from the Greek word for the boundaries of a racecourse - directing people on a journey.

You probably have an idea of the type of person you hope your child will become and you are probably, consciously or not, educating them. You are trying to move them from Point A to Point B.

.Think about your child today.

What experiences, opportunities and values are already being provided by your family?

For example (and these are just examples - it would be impossible to name all of the possible education experiences you could be providing):

- Reading and literacy
- Sport and physical activity
- Music
- Outdoor experiences
- Creativity and the arts
- Community involvement
- Travel and cultural experiences
- Independence and responsibility
- Academic challenge

Which of these are already strengths in your child's life?

We have covered **learning** and **education**. Now, let's explore the final word...

School. This is where most parents put all of their focus. School is the institution which provides an education, and where learning happens, during the weekdays, 38 weeks a year, from age 4-18.

I once read that, even if your child stayed in education to complete a Doctorate, it would still only equate to 4% of the average life.

Schools can not do it all. They can not fill the entire education space.

,So, now things become more interesting - and hopefully feel liberating.

In which areas are you looking for a school to complement your child's broader education and which areas are you hoping for a contrast?

What Do You Want School To Provide?

Now you think about the areas where you would like the school to play a bigger role without worrying that the school needs to do it all.

For example (again, just examples):

- Academic rigour
- A broad curriculum
- Character development
- Sport
- Music and drama
- Inclusion and belonging
- Exposure to different perspectives
- Behaviour and structure
- Community connections
- Preparation for future careers

There are no right or wrong answers.

The purpose of this exercise is to help you think about the partnership between home and school.

A Different Way To Think About School Choice

Many parents look for a school that provides everything. It can be more helpful to ask what is already being provided by our family, and what would we like the school to contribute?

Once you have thought about this, you are ready to begin exploring schools through the lens of your own values and priorities.

YOUR Values

By now, you are hopefully feeling fairly confident in your understanding of the school system and how to find data and use it effectively.

However, there is one final piece of the puzzle.

You.

different families may want different things from a school. For example:

- One family may already provide lots of opportunities for sport and outdoor education and therefore place greater importance on academic provision.
- Another family may value creativity, music and the arts and want a school which complements those priorities.
- A third family may prioritise structure, routine and behaviour because they believe these provide the foundations for future success.

None of these families are right or wrong.

They simply have different values. If you do not take the time to explore your educational values, it becomes difficult to navigate the inevitable trade-offs you will encounter.

Instead, you can find yourself placing too much emphasis on the things which are easiest to measure, rather than the things which matter most to your family.

In the pages which follow, we will explore some of the key debates in education. The aim is to help you identify what matters most to your family so that you can investigate schools through a clearer lens.

The Five Key Debates

Approach to Teaching

Teacher-led

Student-led



Approach to Behaviour

Contextual

Clear



Approach to Curriculum

Breadth

Depth



Approach to Outlook

Traditional

Current



Approach to Access

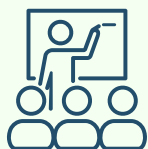
Inclusive

Exclusive



Approach to Teaching

Almost all agree that schools are primarily a place for young people to learn new things. All schools and teachers will care about students learning effectively. However, there are debates about *how* to do this.



A more **teacher-led** approach. Some argue that the best way young people learn is through being directly taught new things by an expert. This does not mean that students *always* sit silently and listen / make notes (although, there will be elements of this). It is more of an approach which emphasises the subject expertise of the teacher.



A more **student-led** approach. Some argue that the best way young people learn is through exploring new content themselves and through discussion with their peers. Rather than learning new things by being told it, it is through ‘doing something’ with the new content. This does not mean that students *are not taught anything by an expert*. It is an approach which emphasises the importance of the learner ‘receiving’ the information - the role of the teacher is to structure this process.

- How are the classrooms set out? In rows or in groups? Is there a standardised approach across all classrooms or is there a mix of layouts?
- A classroom set out in rows might be one which takes a more didactic approach. A classroom set out in groups may take more of a discovery approach.
- If all classroom layouts are the same, it may indicate there is a whole school to teaching. If there is variety, individual teachers may have more autonomy over the approach.

Approach to Behaviour

Everyone wants schools to be calm, safe places. We all want schools to be places of positive student behaviour. However, there are debates about *how* to do this.



A more **contextual** approach. Some argue that we should start with a base of trust - young people will generally behave positively as a 'natural' state. If there are instances of poor behaviour, the aim of the consequences is to get students to reflect on their actions so that they make different choices next time. This does not mean the school will not have rules, rewards or punishments, rather it is an approach which emphasises students knowing how to behave well without the need for an adult to intervene.

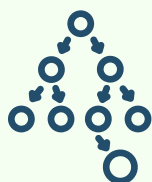


A more '**clear**' approach. Some argue that children have not yet developed the ability to control their actions - they need to learn how to do it through rewards and punishments. This approach starts from a base which believes young people will 'naturally' misbehave if there are not strong boundaries. The aim is also for 'intrinsic' self-regulation, but through a process of adult directed behaviour at school.

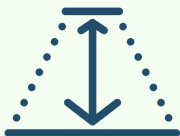
- How prominently are the school rules displayed? Can you see evidence of clear school rules, rewards and consequences? How often is behaviour mentioned in the talks you hear?
- Can you see evidence of 'isolation' or 'internal exclusion' spaces?
- Do teachers / leaders talk about 'no excuses' or 'zero tolerance' or 'restorative justice' or 'reflection rooms'?
- Ask *specific* questions: 'what would be the process if my child did x? eg. forgets their pen, is 10 minutes late, has a shaved head? etc.

Approach to Curriculum

All schools will care about the curriculum they offer students. This refers both to the range of subjects and experiences on offer as well as what is learnt *within* each curriculum area. However, there is debate about how to do this effectively.



A **breadth** approach. Some argue that a ‘good’ curriculum is one which offers lots of experiences - a wide range of different subjects, extra-curricular offers and options for exams at key stage 4. This approach is broad, but shallow - lots of experiences but without going ‘deep’. The idea is that by exposing students to lots of experiences and knowledge, the student will discover their own interests and passions which they can pursue independently in the future.



A **depth** approach. Some would argue that a good curriculum is one which focusses on fewer things, but does them well. Concentrating on the building blocks of good learning, so that in the future, whatever interests and passions might arise, the students have a solid foundation on which to build.

- How many subjects are on offer? For example, arts, music, drama, languages and humanities. When do students need to ‘drop’ subjects? How much choice do students have at key stage 4?
- What is the extra-curricular offer at school? Who runs the sessions? What percentage of pupils take part?
- What topics are studied in each subject? Who has picked these topics and why?

Approach to Outlook

There is broad consensus that a job of school is to prepare students for the future - all students will eventually become members of society with jobs, responsibilities and dreams. There is debate about how to do this.



A more **traditional** approach. Some argue that the skills and knowledge people need now and in the future are the same that people have needed since antiquity. They would argue that the best way to prepare for an uncertain future, is to focus on tried and tested methods which have stood the test of time. They may argue that the job of school is to pass on 'the best that has been thought and said'. The argument goes that the world is built on a base of traditional knowledge and the job of school is to induct children into this community.



A more **current** approach. Some would argue that the curriculum should be relevant to the modern world. They would argue that as society and technology has changed, so should schools. Their focus will be on looking at the skills currently needed and listening to predictions of the future - and building this into the school so that children are ready.

- What subjects are taught and what is taught in them? If the curriculum offer is similar to what you experienced at school, it is likely the school is taking a more traditional approach. Some schools may take a more future-facing curriculum and include subjects or content which you never studied - including new languages, such as Mandarin, new subjects, such as Coding or new topics such as 'grime music'.
- What is the schools view on using technology in the classroom?

Approach to Access

All in society will want schools to be places where all children can succeed. However, there is debate about how to do this.



A more **inclusive** approach. Some argue that schools (and within) schools should be mixed environments. This approach means that learners of all abilities are working together in the same school or the same classroom. The idea will be that schools should be places where people learn to mix with other people who are different to them - whilst offering support to those who need it the most. This can be both at a school level and at a classroom level.



A more **exclusive** approach. Some would argue that learning is best when it is pitched at the right level - this can mean at a school or classroom level. This approach usually means students are divided either into different schools or into different groups within the same school. The argument is that students are best served by experts who know how to get the best out of their particular starting point.

- Are there any entry requirements?
- How are students grouped in the school? Is it mixed-ability or in ability sets?
- How are the sets decided? How often are they changed? Are the same sets used for all subjects?
- How are students supported in their learning - what are the different levels of support offered?
- How are students who have a particular aptitude catered for?

Using Your Values

Now you have spent time exploring your own values, it should enable you to make the most of school visits - these are the best opportunities to learn more about what a school values.

However, it is important to reiterate, schools are dynamic and complex institutions - the values amongst the staff body are like to vary and the school will change and adapt over time. No school will fit neatly into a box - there will always be nuance.

It is also worth stating that there is no 'right' approach - whichever way a school goes about achieving it's goals, we all do want, at root, the same thing - the best for the children.

You may disagree, you may have to make compromises and you are unlikely to be happy with the school 100% of the time. However, if we all start from a base of trust and understanding, we are more likely to build an effective, positive working relationship - this can only be a good thing for our children.

The final way you can use the values framework is to create balance in the areas you can control - most obviously, at home.

You do not need a school to provide everything. In fact, some of the strongest educational experiences emerge when home and school complement one another.

For example, a school with a strong academic focus might be balanced by creative, sporting or community experiences outside school. Equally, a school which places a strong emphasis on independence and exploration might be complemented by greater structure and routine at home.

The goal is not to find a school which perfectly matches every one of your values. The goal is to create the best overall educational experience for your child. School is only one part of that wider picture.

PART FOUR: CONCLUDE

Turning understanding,
investigation and
exploration into
confident decisions.



Top Five Tips



Remember that schools have changed. We have all been to school, have memories of school and have opinions of school. However lots has changed, you will never know the counterfactual and your child is on a different journey to you.



At the start of the process, keep an open mind. As parents, we all want the best for our children - taking a different route to everyone else in the network can feel like a risk. However, at least at the start, keep an open-mind. If you ultimately make the same choice as everyone else, at least it will be because it is the right choice for your family, not simply because everyone else is doing it.



Don't get too attached to one school. There is no perfect option when it comes to schools - all have pros and cons. Try not to get fixed on one school - it probably won't be as amazing as you think and you are not completely in control of being allocated a place.



Think about how you talk about the process with your child. Reiterate that how well they do at school is up to them, not the school they attend. Remind them that there is no perfect option - all have pros and cons. Talk to them about what they want from a school and why. Try not to promise anything or get too excited about one option - they may feel like they are getting 'second-best' if the allocation doesn't work in your favour.



Visit. If possible, visit more than once. The best way to get a feel for a school is to visit the building. Having had the privilege of visiting hundreds of schools in my career, you really can get a 'feel' for a school very quickly. If you can, visit many times and see if you can arrange a visit outside of the normal 'open evening' slots.

Where to Go From Here

I hope this book has helped you feel more confident and more in control of the process. I am sure it still feels somewhat scary, overwhelming and daunting, but I hope less so than it did before.

You have now completed the first stage of the journey. You understand how the system works. You know how to investigate schools more effectively. You have started to explore your own educational values. The next step is to begin applying this understanding to your own context.

1. Use the Preference Planner

The companion Preference Planner is designed to help you bring everything together. It will help you:

- Clarify your priorities
- Compare schools consistently
- Record observations from visits
- Reflect on the trade-offs involved
- Create a preference order with confidence

2. Continue Exploring Schools

Visit schools. Ask questions. Explore websites and curriculum information.

Remember that no individual source of information will provide all the answers. The goal is to build a picture over time.

3. Keep Learning

The school system does not stop once an application has been submitted. Many parents find new questions emerge as they approach allocation day, transition and eventually life inside school itself. For those who would like ongoing support, [School Compass](#) offers additional resources, workshops and programmes designed to help parents navigate the journey with confidence.

"A thoughtful and practical guide to one of the most important decisions parents make."

Applying for a primary school place can feel overwhelming.

Parents are often expected to make one of the first major decisions in their child's educational journey whilst navigating a complex system, conflicting advice and an endless stream of opinions.

This guide is designed to help. Inside, you will learn:

- How the primary admissions process works
- The different types of schools within the English education system
- How to find and interpret school data effectively
- The limitations of league tables and inspection grades
- How to identify the questions that matter most to your family
- A practical framework for exploring your own educational values

Rather than telling you which school is 'best', this guide will help you make informed, confident decisions based on what matters most to your child and family.

About the Author

Joe Pardoe has worked in education since 2007 as a teacher, curriculum leader, senior leader and consultant. He has taught across the sector, worked internationally, led curriculum innovation across schools and supported hundreds of parents to navigate the education system with greater confidence.

Joe is the founder of School Compass, an organisation dedicated to helping parents understand, navigate and thrive within the English school system.