



# MAKING THE MOST OF SECONDARY SCHOOL VISITS

What to **think about**, **look for**  
and **ask** on a school visit



# Navigating the school system

In October, 2021, my life changed - permanently and for the better. I was no longer just a teacher or school leader. I was now 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 source of clear, objective information. Just schools, councils and government all pushing their own agenda.

I decided to set up School Compass to help you navigate your child's school journey with more knowledge, confidence and excitement!

Join our community of parents and explore my site for resources, online courses & tools, as well as bespoke 1to1 packages

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

*Joe Pardoe*

[www.school-compass.com](http://www.school-compass.com)

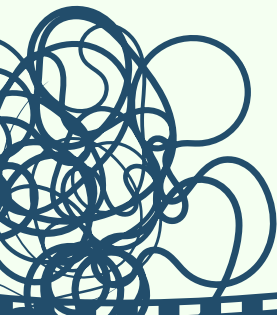


This guide is designed to be used in conjunction with the 'Navigating Secondary School Applications' online course.

if you have not yet signed up for the webinar, I recommend you do so before jumping in - you will get more out of this guide if you do!

Find out more and sign-up: <https://www.school-compass.com/sec-school-applications>

**Note: I cannot give advice about which secondary 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.**



# Making the Most of School Visits

School visits are one of the best ways to find out about a school. After 15 years of being on the 'other side' as a teacher and school leader, I now want to help parents like you make the most of the precious time you have in a school.

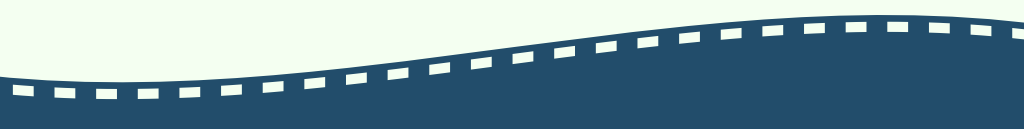
There is a misconception that you can't get a true sense of what a school is like during an organised open evening. They are show events after all, designed to demonstrate the best features of the school (just like when you invite friends over for dinner, you might tidy the house and cook your best ragu!). The Science department won't regularly make things explode and the trampolines might not come out weekly in PE lessons!

However, just like that nosey guest at your dinner party, who, with a little more snooping, can get a good sense of what your house is like on a day-to-day basis, if you know where to look and what to ask, you can get a truer sense of a school during an open evening or other school visit. The marketing material and speeches at these events are carefully put together, giving you a sense of the underlying values of the school leadership. The way teachers interact with young people, the things on display and table layouts can also all offer vital clues for how the school operates on a daily basis.

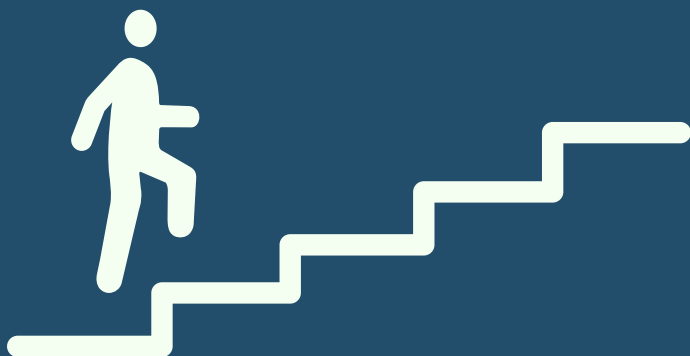
You can (and should!) also ask questions (most parents don't - if they do, it is usually something they could have found on the school website!)

The right question can unlock a lot of vital information. Teachers are not trained salespeople and they are not paid commission. Student volunteers may be 'handpicked', but anyone who has ever spoken to a teenager knows how honest and blunt they can be!

This guide will help you make the most of your visit. Let's dig in...

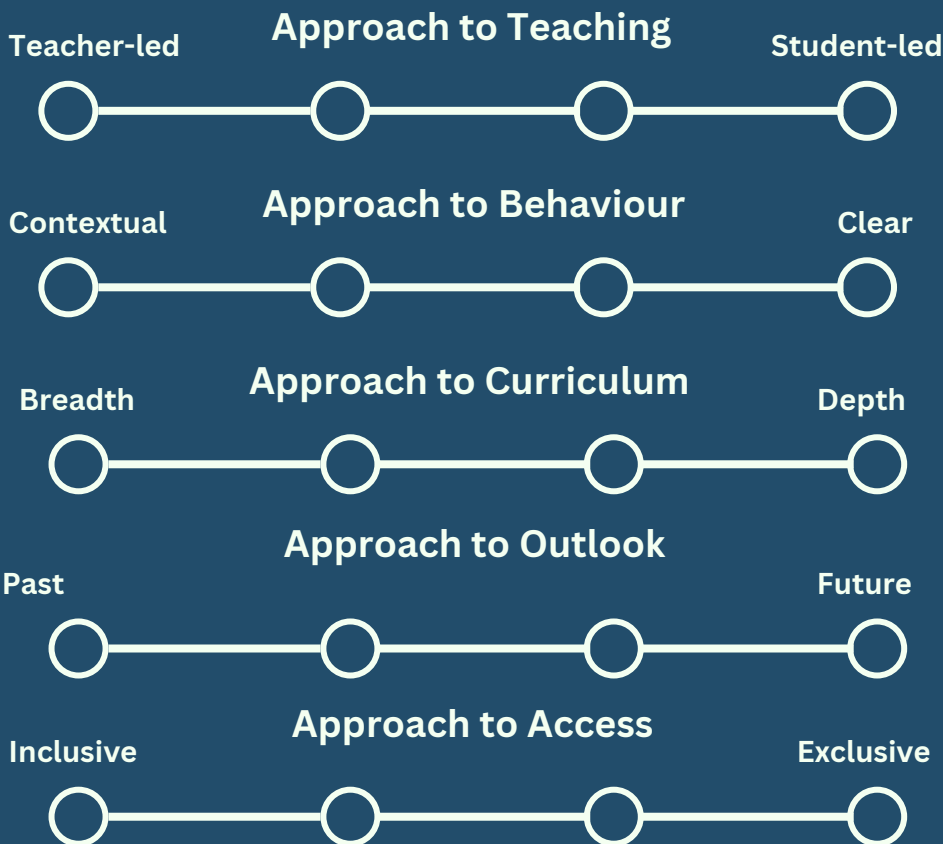
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# BEFORE THE VISIT



The best way to make use of school visits is to go in with a view of what YOU think makes a good school and a good education. This way you can measure the school against the things you care about. The diagram below sets out my ‘Five Key Debates’ framework to help you think about your views on what makes a good school.

## The Five Key Debates



If you want to explore this framework in more detail, I cover this in my [‘Navigating Primary/Secondary School Applications’](#) course

# Research Checklist

As well as considering your own values, it is helpful to have a sense of the school before you step into the building. There are a number of things you can do...



**Websites.** Check out the school website. It should tell you more about the vision and values of the school, give a sense of the staff in the school and have links to all of the school policies. If the school is an Academy, check-out the website of the Multi-Academy Trust it is part of too.



**Ofsted.** Read the report, not just the grade. It will give you a snap-shot of the school. You can use this to formulate questions to ask.



**Exam Data.** Have a look at the published exam data. Again, this is helpful to use as a base to form questions.



**Other Data.** There is a lot of data published about schools - you can find the student demographic data, staff information and financial details of the school. All of this can be used to create a picture of the school BEFORE you attend.

In my course I talk through how to find all of this data and how to use it effectively. You can complete the course in your own time and revisit it throughout the process!

# VISITS





# What to LOOK for...



- What is the library like?
- What type of textbooks / books / resources are seen in classrooms?
- How are the classrooms set out? Rows might suggest more 'teacher-led' lessons, groups may suggest a more 'student-led' approach.
- How do the teaching staff interact with you, your child and other children? Especially notice how they interact with any student volunteers
- What are the music, drama, art and PE facilities like & to what extent are these subjects talked about?
- Can you see any notices about clubs or trips on the walls?
- Are there any displays of school rules and consequences?
- Do students have to walk around the school in a certain way? For example, walking in silence, following a one-way system etc.
- How do the displays look? Are they well-kept?
- What are the toilets like?
- If applicable to you: Are there designated spaces for students with additional needs? Such as relaxation rooms, 1:1 teaching spaces etc.?

# What to LISTEN for...



- Does the head give examples of the 'destinations' of former pupils? For example, the number of students who have gone on to high-performing institutions/professions.
- Does the head celebrate the experiences of the pupils?
- Are trips, clubs or societies mentioned?
- Does the head talk about the future and the skills needed in the next 25 years?
- Are other career routes discussed? For example, encouraging enterprise or apprenticeships?
- Does the head talk about school rules or consequences?
- Does the head / leader mention parents and / or the community?

# What to ASK Staff



- How are students grouped? Is it 'setted' or 'mixed ability'?
- When do students choose GCSE options? How much choice is there?
- What trips do students typically go on?
- What is it like during lesson transitions?
- What do students typically do during break and lunch time?
- How does the behaviour system work in reality? For example, ask a specific question... 'if a student (forgets their pen, shaves their head, wears earrings etc) what happens?
- Is there a standardised approach to teaching and learning or are teachers given flexibility?
- How are students with special educational needs / high starting points supported or stretched to ensure they thrive?
- Do any teachers mark for exam boards? Exam boards hire teachers to grade papers - it can help give an understanding of how to get the most marks in exams.
- What is staff turnover like? Are there many new teachers?

# What to ASK Students



- Do you have many supply teachers?
- What grades do you expect to leave with?
- Which subjects are you doing well in? Why?
- Which subjects are you struggling with? Why?
- Are you happy here?
- What kind of things do you do in your tutor time?
- What has been your most memorable experience of this school so far?
- Is there any bullying here? What happens if there is bullying?
- What is it like walking between lessons?
- What do students do at break and lunch time?
- What is it like leaving school and getting home?
- Are all students well behaved here? Do you find it easy to learn in lessons?
- What is your favourite thing about the school?
- If you were the headteacher, what improvement would you make?
- How did you feel when you first started this school? What advice would you give to a student about to come here?

# NEXT STEPS



# What next...?

I hope you have found this mini guide to be a useful companion as you embark on school visits & given you some key things to think about. Open Evenings can be one of the best ways to find out about a school - I hope this booklet allows you to make the most of your visit.

If you want a more in-depth look at the school application process, how to find out lots of information about schools and how to explore your own values, my WEBINAR on this very topic runs from July to September - I have lots of dates and times available, but they usually get booked up fast.



All webinar sign-ups get the opportunity to ask a question, which I promise to answer either before, during or after the session.

The recording is sent out to all participants - you do not need to attend live to get the information.

Finally - the webinar now comes with my book! This accompanies the course and provides a series of checklists, tools and fact-sheets to help you through the process.

To find out more, and to sign-up, visit:

<https://www.school-compass.com/sec-school-applications>