

FREE

PRIMARY SCHOOL VISIT COMPANION

The questions that
reveal what a school is
really like



By Joe Pardoe

**Teacher, School Leader and Founder of School
Compass**

How to Make the Most of School Visits

School visits are one of the best ways to understand what a school is really like.

Many parents worry that open mornings are simply marketing events... and to some extent they are. Schools naturally want to showcase their strongest features. You may see carefully prepared activities, impressive displays and confident presentations.

However, that does not mean you cannot gain genuine insight.

If you know what to look for, listen for and ask, a short visit can tell you a huge amount about how a primary school works day to day. The way adults interact with children, the language leaders use, the organisation of classrooms and play spaces, and even the things displayed on walls provide valuable clues about the school's priorities.

Most parents notice the obvious things. Fewer know which details matter or which questions unlock useful information.

That is where this guide comes in.

Over the next few pages, you will find things to look for, listen for and ask - helping you move beyond first impressions and build a clearer picture of each school.

The most useful information is often hiding in plain sight. This guide will help you spot it.

STEP ONE: What to LOOK for...



- Is there a library? What is it like?
- What books, resources and areas for block play, imaginative play, water, sand, mud-kitchen, art and outdoor learning can you see?
- How do the classrooms look? busy, chaotic or clinical? How does this make you feel?
- How are the classrooms set out?
- How do staff interact with you, your child and other children?
- Can you see notices about clubs, trips or wrap-around care?
- How is information communicated with parents? Can you see examples?
- Are school rules, rewards or consequences displayed?
- Do pupils move around the school in a particular way?
- How well-kept and recent are the displays?
- What are the toilets like?
- How structured is playtime? How active are the adults?
- Are there spaces for small-group interventions or additional-needs support?
- How is lunch managed?
- How is technology being used - and for what purpose?

COMPASS POINT

Look beyond one Reception room. How do classrooms and learning environments change as children move through the school?

STEP TWO: What to LISTEN for...



The talks and presentations you hear from school leaders are prepared. This is what they WANT you to hear about the school - which makes their choices revealing.

- What does the leader emphasise? SATs results, curriculum, school values or something else?
- Do they celebrate pupils' experiences? Are trips and clubs mentioned?
- Do they talk about school rules or consequences?
- Do they explain how pupils and parents have a voice - through councils, feedback or surveys?
- Do they discuss inclusion, supporting pupils who struggle and stretching those who thrive?
- Do they mention their approach to technology?
- Do they explain how parents are involved in the school community?
- Do they mention support with transition?

COMPASS POINT

The speech is carefully prepared, so notice what the leader chooses to leave out as well as what they include. Their emphasis gives you clues about the leadership team's priorities - but these may not be the same things that matter most to you.

STEP 3: What to ASK Staff...



- Which subjects are taught by specialist teachers, such as music or PE?
- How are pupils grouped? Do different groups receive different work?
- How are children stretched and challenged?
- What structures support pupils who need more help?
- How broad is the curriculum beyond literacy and numeracy?
- What is your approach to SATs? What happens to the wider curriculum in Years 5 and 6?
- How does assessment work? How do you track pupils' progress?
- How will I find out how my child is doing?
- What trips do pupils typically experience? Who pays?
- What do pupils do during break and lunchtime?
- How does the behaviour system work in practice?
- How are interventions run? Who leads them, how long do they last and is there a clear end point?
- How are pupil successes celebrated?
- Does play-based learning continue into Key Stage One?
- How does lunchtime work? Are free school meals offered and how does payment work?
- Is there a breakfast club?
- Which after-school clubs are available? Are there waiting lists, costs or restrictions for Reception pupils?
- How is technology used in this school?
- **If relevant, how are summer-born children supported?**

COMPASS POINT

How are staff developed? What sort of things are covered in CPD sessions? How long have the teachers worked here?

STEP 4: What to ASK Pupils...



- At primary level, you may not have many opportunities to speak directly with pupils. The questions you ask will depend on their age.
- What is the best thing about this school?
- What do you do at lunchtime?
- What are you proud of so far this year?
- Have you been on any trips?
- What are you learning about at the moment?



COMPASS POINT

Young children may give short answers, but those answers can still reveal what they remember and value. Listen for specific experiences, relationships and learning - not simply whether they say the school is 'good'.

STEP 5: Understanding the answers...



By now, you have probably realised that applying for primary school is not as simple as looking at Ofsted grades.

There is plenty of information out there.

Schools have websites. There are Ofsted reports, performance information, Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, friends, neighbours and endless opinions.

The challenge is not finding information.

The challenge is understanding which information matters and interpreting what it means.

Most parents do not struggle because they fail to collect information. They struggle because they do not have a framework for interpreting it.

They follow the crowd. They focus on Ofsted.

They prioritise what is easiest to measure rather than exploring the trade-offs behind different approaches.

The result is that families can spend months researching schools without developing a clear way to compare them or rank their preferences.

Take the NEXT step...

If you are ready to make confident school decisions, I would love to help you with the next step. The Primary School Applications Programme will help you...

Feel confident that you are making informed preferences - not simply following the crowd.

Understand how experienced educators interpret schools, so you can see beyond Ofsted grades and playground rumours.

Recognise the strengths, limitations and trade-offs behind different school approaches.

Explore what matters to you and your family using my Five Key Debates framework.

Compare schools and rank your preferences through a clear, practical process.

Understand admissions, waiting lists and the steps that follow your application.

Find out more HERE

www.school-compass.com/primary-applications-journey

I look forward to supporting you through this journey!

Joe Pardoe