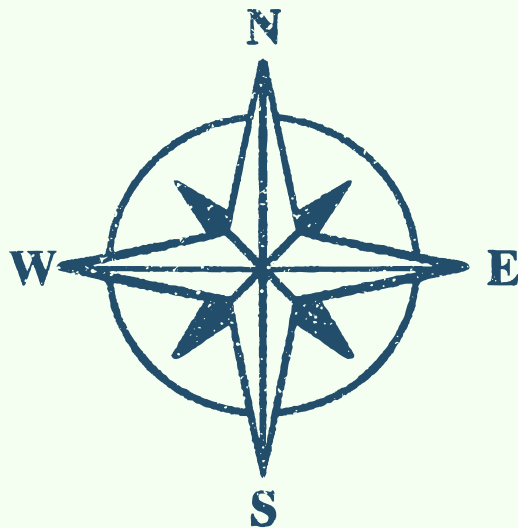


SECONDARY SCHOOL APPLICATIONS SUMMER STARTER GUIDE

What to discuss, consider
and decide before open
evenings begin



Joe Pardoe

Teacher, School Leader and
Founder, School Compass

JOE PARDOE

Why Start During Summer?

If your child is about to enter Year 6, secondary school applications may feel like something to deal with after the holidays.

However, once September arrives, applications open, schools begin holding events and the process moves very quickly.

The summer gives you something which may be harder to find later... time to think.

You do not need to choose a school now. You do not even need to have a shortlist. The aim is to begin the process before other people's opinions, impressive open evenings and application deadlines start competing for your attention.

This guide will help you:

- explore what you and your child hope to gain from secondary school
- consider some of the important trade-offs between different approaches
- separate what you know from what you have simply heard
- decide what you need to investigate when schools reopen

By the end, you should have a clearer set of family priorities and a practical plan for September. You will not have found the perfect school, because it does not exist. You will have taken the first step towards making a thoughtful, informed application on your own terms.

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.

How to Use This Guide...

This is not a guide to choosing a secondary school from the sofa. Schools can change, published information has limitations and you will learn much more once visits begin.

Instead, use these pages to prepare for the decisions ahead.

Work through the questions slowly. You may want to complete some individually before comparing answers with another parent or carer. Include your child in the conversation too, but remember that listening to their views is different from handing them responsibility for the final decision.

As you work through the guide:

- write down your first response before overthinking it
- notice where adults in the family disagree
- distinguish a firm priority from a simple preference
- look for the trade-offs hidden inside each answer
- record questions rather than rushing towards conclusions

Applications are based on preferences, not guaranteed choices. The number of preferences and the process vary between Local Authorities, so check your own council's current guidance.

By September, your aim is to have an open mind, a realistic list of schools to explore and a clearer idea of what you need to discover.

About the Author



Joe Pardoe has worked in education since 2007 as a teacher, curriculum leader, senior leader and consultant. He has worked in schools across England and internationally, and now helps parents understand and navigate the school system through School Compass. He is navigating the system, like you, as a dad to two young boys!

Education is values-based....

What one person believes makes a good school, teacher or education may be very different from what another person believes - even within the same family.

This means there is no universal, objective definition of a 'good' school. Much depends on what you value and what you hope your child will gain from their education.

Before comparing schools, it is therefore worth spending some time reflecting on your own priorities.

The purpose of this exercise is not to find the 'right' answers.

Instead, it is designed to help you become more aware of what matters most to your family, so that you can make decisions intentionally rather than simply following the crowd, relying on league tables or focusing solely on Ofsted grades.

The Five Key Debates framework provides one way of thinking about some of the major trade-offs that exist in education.

As you work through the following pages, try not to think about specific schools straight away.

Instead, focus on the kind of educational experience you would like your child to have.

On the next page, I will introduce my Five Key Debates in Education Framework. The Five Key Debates framework provides one way of exploring these trade-offs.

Rather than asking whether a school is 'good' or 'bad', it encourages you to think about what YOU think makes a school the right fit for you and your family.

As you work through the following pages, remember that most schools sit somewhere between the two extremes on each continuum. The aim is not to find the 'correct' position, but to identify what matters most to you.

The Five Key Debates

Teacher-led **Approach to Teaching** **Student-led**



A horizontal line with four white circles, representing a spectrum from Teacher-led to Student-led.

Approach to Behaviour

Contextual Clear

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graph LR; A(( )) --- B(( )) --- C(( )) --- D(( ))
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Approach to Curriculum

Breadth Depth

The diagram consists of a horizontal white line with four white circles. The word 'Breadth' is positioned above the first circle on the left, and the word 'Depth' is positioned above the last circle on the right.

Approach to Outlook

Past Future



A horizontal line with four white circles, representing a spectrum from Inclusive to Exclusive.

Approach to Teaching...

Without overthinking it, where do you instinctively sit on this continuum?

Teacher-led

Student-led



Personal Reflection Questions

- When you think about the best teachers you had at school, what made them effective?
- Do you believe children learn best when knowledge is clearly explained, or when they discover ideas for themselves?
- How independent is your child currently?
- Does your child thrive with structure and routine, or with freedom and exploration?
- What balance would you like between direct instruction and independent learning?
- What do you hope a classroom feels like for your child?

Discussion Points

- Where did each of us place ourselves on the continuum?
- Did either of us have a strong reaction to one end?
- How much does our own school experience influence our thinking?
- Are we looking for a school that feels familiar, or something different?
- If we had to compromise, where would we be willing to compromise?

Notes:

Approach to Behaviour...

Without overthinking it, where do you instinctively sit on this continuum?

Contextual

Clear



Personal Reflection Questions

- What do you think good behaviour looks like in a school?
- Do you believe children generally want to behave well, or need clear boundaries and consequences to help them do so?
- How important is consistency across different teachers and classrooms?
- How much flexibility should schools have when responding to individual circumstances?
- How would you want a school to respond if your child made a mistake?
- What balance would you like between support, reflection, rewards and consequences?

Discussion Points

- Where did each of us place ourselves on the continuum?
- Which experiences have shaped our views on behaviour in schools?
- Do we prioritise consistency or flexibility?
- How important are clear rules and routines to us?
- If we had to compromise, where would we be willing to compromise?

Notes:

Approach to Curriculum...

Without overthinking it, where do you instinctively sit on this continuum?

Breadth

Depth



Personal Reflection Questions

- Is it more important that children experience lots of different subjects and activities, or become highly secure in a smaller number of areas?
- How important are arts, music, drama, sport and extra-curricular activities to you?
- How much value do you place on academic specialisation?
- Would you prefer your child to keep their options open for as long as possible?
- How important is it that your child discovers new interests and passions?
- What balance would you like between variety and mastery?

Discussion Points

- Where did each of us place ourselves on the continuum?
- Which subjects or experiences do we value most for our child?
- How important is academic achievement compared to a broad educational experience?
- Are there opportunities we would be disappointed if our child missed out on?
- If we had to compromise, where would we be willing to compromise?

Notes:

Approach to Outlook...

Without overthinking it, where do you instinctively sit on this continuum?

Past

Future



Personal Reflection Questions

- What do you think schools should primarily prepare children for?
- How important is it that schools preserve traditions, knowledge and ways of thinking which have stood the test of time?
- How important is it that schools adapt to changes in society, technology and the world of work?
- Do you think schools should focus on timeless knowledge or emerging skills – or a balance of both?
- How important is technology in your vision of a good education?
- What balance would you like between preparing children for today's world and tomorrow's world?

Discussion Points

- Where did each of us place ourselves on the continuum?
- Which aspects of our own education would we want schools to preserve?
- What skills or knowledge do we think will be most important in the future?
- How much emphasis should schools place on technology and innovation?
- If we had to compromise, where would we be willing to compromise?

Notes:

Approach to Access...

Without overthinking it, where do you instinctively sit on this continuum?

Inclusive

Exclusive



Personal Reflection Questions

- What does inclusion mean to you in a school context?
- Do you believe children benefit most from learning alongside a wide range of peers with different backgrounds, abilities and needs?
- Are there circumstances where you think specialist provision or selective admissions are beneficial?
- How important is academic, social and cultural diversity within a school community?
- What balance would you like between supporting individual needs and creating a shared experience for all pupils?
- What kind of school community would you like your child to be part of?

Discussion Points

- Where did each of us place ourselves on the continuum?
- What experiences have shaped our views on inclusion and selection?
- How important is diversity of background, ability and experience to us?
- What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of more selective approaches?
- If we had to compromise, where would we be willing to compromise?

Notes:

Beyond Year 7

Secondary school is not just about the first few weeks of Year 7. It is also the beginning of a five/seven-year journey which will shape many of your child's experiences, friendships, interests and opportunities. As you think about the schools you are considering, try looking beyond the immediate transition and reflect on the kind of experience you hope your child will have over the coming years.

Personal Reflection Questions

- What opportunities do you hope secondary school will open up for your child?
- How important are arts, music, drama and sport to your family?
- How important is academic achievement compared to personal development and wellbeing?
- What interests, talents or passions would you like your child to explore?
- How important are careers education, work-related learning and preparation for adulthood?
- What kind of friendships and peer group do you hope your child will develop?
- What worries you most about the transition to secondary school?
- What excites you most about the opportunities secondary school may provide?

Discussion Points

- What do we hope our child will gain from secondary school beyond exam results?
- What experiences would we be disappointed if our child missed out on?
- How much importance do we place on GCSE outcomes compared to wider opportunities?
- What skills, habits and characteristics do we hope our child develops by age 16?
- Are we focusing more on avoiding risks or creating opportunities?
- If we imagine our child leaving school at 16, what would success look like to us?

Research Checklist

As well as reflecting on your own values, it is helpful to gather as much information as possible about the schools you are considering.

The aim is not to find a school which is 'perfect'. Instead, it is to build a fuller picture of how each school operates, what it values and whether it is likely to be a good fit for your child and family. Below are some useful places to start (the details are in the 'Secondary School Applications Handbook':



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.



Conversations. Where possible, speak to current parents, staff or pupils. Their experiences can provide valuable insights into daily life at the school. However, remember that all experiences are individual. Use conversations to gather perspectives rather than definitive answers.

READY TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP?

Navigate secondary school applications with confidence

This guide has helped you begin the conversation.

My complete Secondary School Applications Programme will help you understand the process, research schools, make the most of visits and submit your preferences feeling informed, calm and in control.

Explore the programme and get started:

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