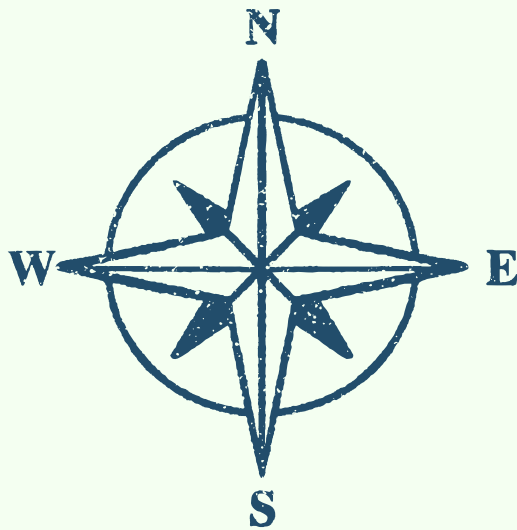


SECONDARY SCHOOL APPLICATIONS PREFERENCE PLANNER

A practical companion to
the Secondary School
Applications Handbook



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Why This Planner Exists...

Navigating secondary school applications can be a challenge, but the bit that is surprisingly difficult is the bit at the end - rank ordering your 3 (or 6 depending on your area) preferences for schools.

On the surface, it seems like a simple decision. Visit a few schools, compare the information available and choose the one you like best. In reality, it is rarely that straightforward.

Schools are complex organisations. No school is perfect. Every school involves trade-offs. To make matters even more challenging, much of the information available to parents is fragmented, inconsistent or difficult to interpret.

This is why many parents find themselves feeling overwhelmed by the process.

The purpose of this planner is not to tell you which school is 'best'.

Instead, it is designed to help you organise your thinking, record your observations and make decisions with greater confidence.

As you work through these pages, you will:

- Clarify what matters most to your family
- Record information from school visits and open events
- Compare schools consistently
- Reflect on the strengths and limitations of different options
- Create a preference order based on your own priorities and values

The goal is not to find a perfect school - there isn't one!

The goal is to make a thoughtful, informed decision that feels right for your child and family.

Remember, schools are only one part of a child's education. Home life, friendships, interests, activities and relationships all play an important role in helping children learn, grow and thrive.

Hopefully, this planner will help you navigate the process with greater clarity, confidence and peace of mind.

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 booklet...

Navigating Secondary School Applications can feel overwhelming. There is a huge amount of information, advice and opinion available to parents - and it can be difficult to know what matters most.

This planner is designed to help you bring everything together.

The purpose is not to find a 'perfect' school. No school will be perfect.

Instead, this planner will help you identify the schools which best fit your family's values, priorities and circumstances.

Remember, school applications are based on preferences, not choices. While the exact process varies between Local Authorities, most parents will be asked to rank between three and six schools in order of preference.

The pages that follow will help you:

- ✓ Reflect on what matters most to your family
- ✓ Compare schools consistently
- ✓ Record observations from visits and open events
- ✓ Organise key information in one place
- ✓ Create a preference order with confidence

Take your time.

Discuss your thoughts with your partner, family and friends.

Most importantly, remember that the goal is not to find the "best" school.

The goal is to make a thoughtful and informed decision for your child.

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!

The planner is set up for a three-school preference list simply to save space. If your Local Authority allows more preferences, you can follow the same process by adding additional columns and adapting the scoring system.

For each consideration, there is space to record notes and assign a score.

1 should be given to the school which best meets your needs in that category.

3 (or 6 if you are comparing six schools) should be given to the school which least meets your needs in that category.

At the end of each section, total the scores for each school. The school with the lowest overall score will often be the strongest match based on the criteria you have chosen.

However, remember that this is a **tool to support your thinking**, not make the decision for you. Some factors will matter far more than others, and there may be circumstances which are difficult to capture with a simple scoring system.

Use the scores as a **starting point for discussion rather than a definitive answer**. An example is shown below...

Consideration	School A	School B	School C
Distance / Travel Time / Ease of Commute	1 - 10 minute walk	3 - 25 minute walk (in the wrong direction for work)	2 - 20 minute drive but on the way to work.
Wrap-around care offer	2 - good offer, but not running for term 1 (will need to plan!)	1 - full wrap-around care after settling in period	3 - No afterschool clubs for Reception year
Timings of the school day	1 - 08:35-15:15	2 - 08:45-15:30	3 - 08:50-15:00
TOTAL	4	6	8

THE FIVE KEY DEBATES

Understanding
your values before
ranking your
preferences



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; C(( )) --- L(( )) --- M(( )) --- R(( ));
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A horizontal line with four white circles, representing a spectrum from Breadth to Depth.

Approach to Outlook

Past

Future



The diagram consists of a horizontal white line with four white circles at regular intervals. The word 'Past' is positioned above the first circle on the left, and the word 'Future' is positioned above the fourth circle on the right. The entire diagram is set against a dark blue background.

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.

LOGISTICS

The practical
realities of school
life and family
routines



The Practical Considerations...



A school may look perfect on paper, but practical considerations matter too.

Travel times, wrap-around care, school hours and the likelihood of securing a place can all have a significant impact on your family's day-to-day experience.

Use the table below to compare the practical realities of each school you are considering.

Consideration	School A	School B	School C
Distance / Travel Time / Ease of Commute			
Travel arrangements before and after school / after school clubs			
Timings of the school day			
Likelihood of securing a place (depending on distance and how over-subscribed / under-subscribed the school is)			
Existing friendship groups and social transition			
TOTAL			

DATA

Looking beyond
headlines, grades
and league tables



The data...



The information in this section can be useful, but it should be interpreted carefully.

Much of the published data about schools focuses on things which can be measured - such as inspection outcomes, test results and class sizes. These can help build a picture of a school, but they rarely tell the whole story.

Remember, there is no objectively 'best' school. The importance you place on factors such as Ofsted grades, academic performance or class sizes will depend on your own values and priorities.

It is also worth remembering that both inspection reports and published performance data are backward-looking. They describe a school at a particular point in time, but schools are dynamic organisations which can change significantly over the course of a few years.

Use the table below to record key information and observations. Focus on identifying areas you would like to investigate further rather than drawing firm conclusions.

Consideration	School A	School B	School C
Average Class Size			
Number of classes in each year (form entry)			
Ofsted grade (and key points)			
Progress 8 / GCSE outcomes / destinations			
TOTAL			

SCHOOL VISITS

Seeing schools
through the lens
of what matters
most to your
family



Observations from the Visit...



School visits provide an opportunity to see beyond websites, data and inspection reports. Use the table below to record your observations and first impressions from each visit. Focus on gathering evidence rather than making immediate judgements.

Consideration	School A	School B	School C
Staff interactions			
Atmosphere			
Classrooms and resources			
Facilities and outdoor areas			
Clubs, trips, enrichment and leadership opportunities			
Displays and examples of student work			
Communication and organisation			
Interactions between (and with) pupils			
Presentations from staff			

Alignment with OUR Values...



Now reflect on how each school aligns with your family's values and priorities. There are no right or wrong answers - simply consider how well each school fits what matters most to you and your child.

Consideration	School A	School B	School C
Teaching and learning			
Behaviour and culture			
Curriculum			
Careers, aspirations and preparation for the future			
Inclusion and support			
Leadership and vision			
Support for transition to Year 7			
TOTAL			

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Turning
observations into
informed
decisions



Final Reflections...



You should now have a much clearer understanding of your values, the schools you are considering and the trade-offs involved in each option.

As a starting point for discussion, total the scores for each school. Remember, throughout this planner, 1 represented the strongest fit and 3 (or 6, if adapted) represented the weakest fit. This means that the lower the total score, the closer the overall match to your values, priorities and circumstances. The school with the lowest score may indicate the option which most closely aligns with the factors you have explored throughout this planner.

	School A	School B	School C
TOTAL			

Remember, the scoring system is a tool to support your thinking, not make the decision for you.

Some considerations will matter more than others. There may also be factors which are difficult to capture in a simple scoring system. Use the scores as a starting point for discussion rather than a definitive answer.

	School Name	Reason
Rank 1		
Rank 2		
Rank 3		

Remember, there is no objective 'best' school - it is about understanding the pros and cons, and trade-offs, of all the school options. There is no perfect option. School is also just **one part** of your child's education.

It is also tempting to see schools as static, solid institutions. But, when joining a school, you are joining a **dynamic community** of which you and your child will be **active members**. Each year, there will be new teachers and new students (and maybe new leaders).

NEXT STEPS

From choosing a
school to building
a successful
partnership



What next...?

Good luck with your applications!

I hope this workbook has helped you feel more confident, more informed and more in control of the process than when you first started. Remember, there is no perfect school. Every option will involve strengths, limitations and trade-offs. The goal is not to find the 'best' school, but to make a thoughtful decision which reflects your child, your family and your values.

If you have any questions, feedback or suggestions, please do get in touch. I genuinely enjoy hearing from parents and am always looking for ways to improve the resources I create - my email is joe@school-compass.com

Want to go deeper?

If you would like a deeper understanding of the school application process, you may find my Navigating Secondary School Applications with Confidence Toolkit helpful.

The toolkit expands on the ideas in this workbook and includes:

- Detailed explanations of school types, admissions and appeals
- Guidance on understanding school data and inspection reports
- The Five Key Debates framework in greater depth
- School visit walkthroughs and question banks
- Practical tools, templates and checklists

Once Places Are Allocated...

For many parents, receiving a school place brings relief - but it also marks the beginning of a new phase. Questions about transition, friendships, communication, routines and supporting your child often become much more important than the application itself.

My Transition to Secondary School Programme is designed to support parents from school place allocation through to the first term of Year Seven, helping you understand how schools work, build positive relationships with staff and support your child as they settle into school life. You can find details of all current resources, programmes and events at www.school-compass.com