

FREE

SECONDARY 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 evenings are simply marketing events - and to some extent they are. Schools naturally want to showcase their best features. You may see exciting (explosive!) sciences demonstrations, impressive displays and carefully prepared presentations. Trampolines usually make a rare appearance in the sports hall.

However, that doesn't mean you can't gain genuine insight.

In fact, if you know what to look for, listen for and ask, a school visit can tell you a huge amount about how a school operates day-to-day. The way staff interact with students, the language leaders use, the opportunities on offer and even the things displayed on walls can provide valuable clues about the school's values and priorities.

Most parents focus on the obvious things. Fewer know which questions unlock the most useful information.

That's where this guide comes in.

Over the next few pages, you'll find a series of things to look for, listen for and ask during your visit, helping you move beyond first impressions and build a clearer picture of whether a school is the right fit for your child.

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

STEP ONE: What to LOOK for...



- What is the library like?
- What type of textbooks / books / resources are seen in classrooms?
- 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.?

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How are the classrooms set out? Rows might suggest more 'teacher-led' lessons, groups may suggest a more 'student-led' approach. **Are different classrooms set up differently or are they all (broadly) the same?** This will give you an insight into how much freedom individual teachers have when it comes to their own approaches/

STEP TWO: What to LISTEN for...

The talks, presentations and speeches you hear from senior members of staff are prepared... This is what they WANT you to hear about the school. This can provide a lot of helpful information...

- 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?

COMPASS POINT

Does the head talk more about outcomes or experiences?

The leadership will 'show-off' what THEY care about. It might not be what YOU care about! For example, they may talk about the exam success of pupils (if this is a selective school, this should be the absolute minimum!) - so what else, if anything, is mentioned? What type of pupils are they hoping to develop? **Is this what YOU want for YOUR child?**

STEP 3: What to ASK Staff...



- What trips do students typically go on?
- What is it like during lesson transitions?
- What do students typically do during break and lunch time?
- 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?

COMPASS POINT

How are students grouped? Is it 'setted' or 'mixed ability'? How are these groups decided? It will give you an insight into how the school views 'intelligence' and how much they use tests.

When do students choose GCSE options? How much choice is there? Some schools have shortened KS3 to two years - meaning students spend longer on exam content. This process often takes parents by surprise. It is best to find out now.

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?

STEP 4: 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?
- What kind of things do you do in your tutor time?
- 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?

COMPASS POINT

Children are famously honest! You will get more information asking these two questions than all of the others in this guide book!

What has been your most memorable experience of this school so far?

Are you happy here?

STEP 5: Understanding the answers...



By now, you've probably realised applying for secondary school isn't as simple as looking at Ofsted reports and exam grades.

There is information out there.

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

The challenge isn't finding information.

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

Most parents don't make mistakes because they fail to collect information. They make mistakes because they don't know how to interpret it.

They follow the crowd. They focus on Ofsted.

They prioritise the things that are easiest to measure rather than the things that matter most to their child.

The result is that many families spend months researching schools but never develop a framework for comparing them.

Take the NEXT step...

If you're ready to make confident school decisions, I'd love to help you with the next step. I want you to...

- Feel confident that you're choosing a school for YOUR child - not simply following the crowd.
- Understand how experienced educators think about schools, so you can see beyond Ofsted grades and league tables.
- Know exactly what to look for on school visits, and leave feeling informed rather than overwhelmed.
- Make your application decisions with confidence, knowing you've considered what really matters to your family.
- Become the kind of parent who understands how schools really work - and can advocate confidently for their child.

Find out more [here](https://www.school-compass.com/secondary-applications-journey)

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I look forward to supporting you through this journey!

Joe Pardoe