



MAKING THE MOST OF PRIMARY 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 independent, objective source of information - separate from schools, local councils or government.

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
Founder of School Compass

www.school-compass.com

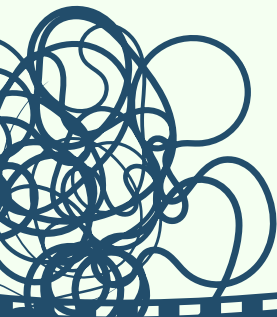


This guide is designed to be used in conjunction with the 'Navigating Primary School Applications' online course.

if you have not yet completed the course, 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/primary-applications>

Note: I cannot give advice about which primary 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.

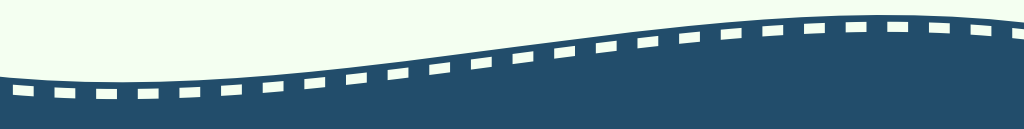
There is a misconception that you can't get a true sense of what a school is like during an organised school visit. They are show events after all, designed to demonstrate the best features of the school (just like when you invite friends over for dinner, you might tidy the house and cook your best ragu!). 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 morning, stay and play 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.

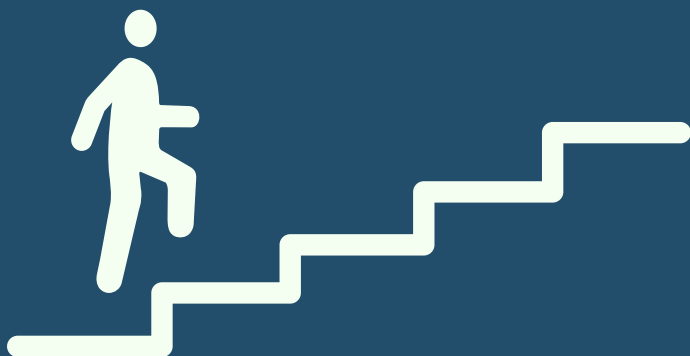
You can (and should!) also ask questions (most parents don't - if they do, it is usually something they could have found on the school website!)

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 young person knows how honest and blunt they can be!

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

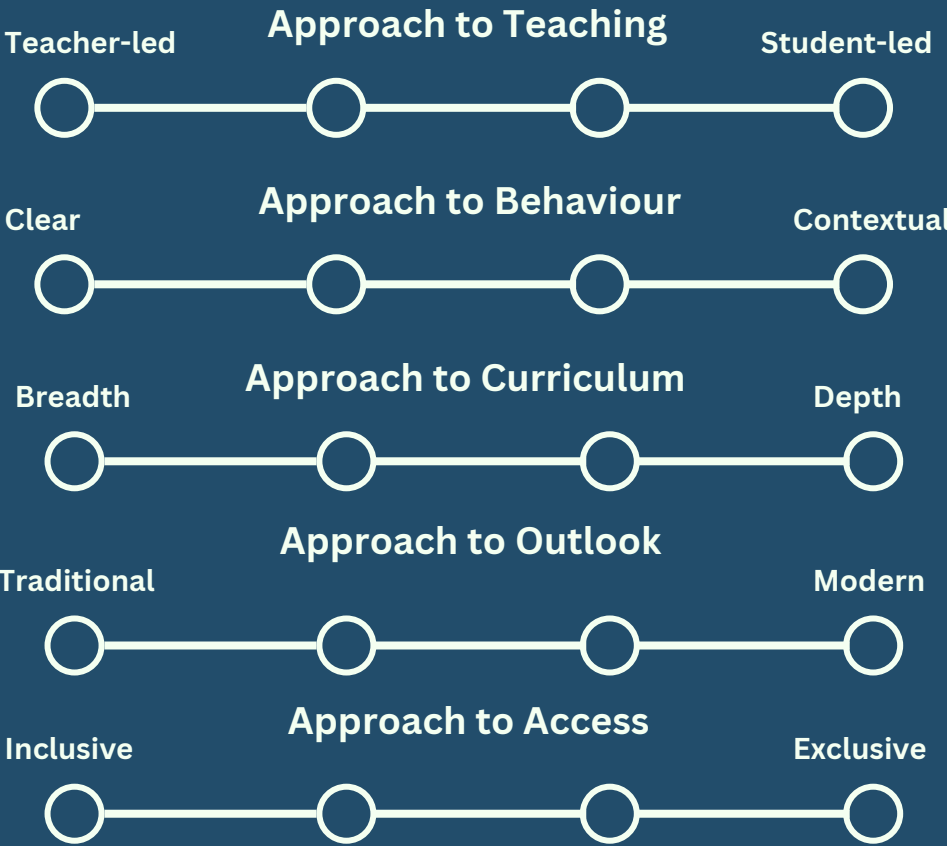
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BEFORE THE VISIT



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 School Applications’ online course](#). We explore more about each of these factors, the pros and cons and what it means for you and your child.

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... Including how to find lots of 'hidden data' most people don't know exists - such as how much money a school spends on supply teachers!

VISITS



What to LOOK for...



- Is there a library? What is it like?
- What type of textbooks / books / resources are seen in classrooms? Block corners? Imaginative play? Outdoor spaces? Water play? Sand? Mud-kitchen? Arts and crafts?
- How do the classrooms look? Messy? Chaotic? Clinical? How does this make you feel?
- 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 the other children? Is it positive?
- Can you see any notices about clubs or trips on the walls? Any notices about before and after school activities? (wrap-around care).
- How is information communicated with parents? Can you see examples on the walls?
- Are there any displays of school rules and consequences? For example, reward charts.
- 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 students move around the building?

What to LOOK for...



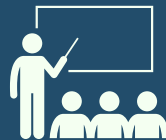
- How do the displays look? Are they well-kept? Are they recent?
- What are the toilets like?
- How 'structured' is play-time? How active are the adults?
- Are there different spaces for small group interventions? For example, to support learners with additional learning needs.
- How is lunch managed?
- How is technology used? How frequently? For what purpose?

What to LISTEN for...



- What does the leader emphasise? SATS results? Curriculum offer? School values?
- Does the head celebrate the experiences of the pupils? Are trips and clubs mentioned?
- Does the head talk about school rules or consequences?
- Do they mention how students and parents have agency within the school? Student councils? Feedback? Surveys?
- Does the leader talk about inclusion, supporting students who are struggling and pushing students who are thriving?
- Does the leader mention their approach to technology?
- Does the leader mention how parents are involved in the school community?
- Does the leader mention support with transition?

What to ASK Staff



- What subjects are taught by specialist teachers? For example, music, PE etc.?
- How are students grouped? Are students put in different groups with different work?
- How are children stretched and challenged? What structures are in place to support students who need more help?
- How broad is the curriculum - beyond literacy and numeracy?
- What is your approach to SATS? What happens to the curriculum in Y5/Y6?
- How does assessment work? How do you track pupil's progress?
- How will I find out about how my child is doing? Parents' evening? Written reports?
- What trips do students typically go on? Who has to pay?
- What is it like during transition to break and lunch? What is it like in the corridors?
- 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 (feels bullied, throws an object, gets upsets etc) what happens?
- What support is available to support improvements in behaviour?

What to ASK Staff



- How does school run interventions? Who runs them? Be specific - for example, if my child is struggling with numeracy, what will happen? Who runs these interventions? How long do these interventions last for - is there a clear end-point?
- How are student successes celebrated?
- Is there a standardised approach to teaching and learning or are teachers given flexibility?
- What is staff turnover like? Are there many new teachers?
- What happens to the approach to learning when children start Key Stage One? Is there a continuation of play-based learning?
- If relevant, how do you support summer-born children?
- How does lunch time work? Are free school meals offered? How does payment work?
- Does the school run a breakfast club?
- What after school clubs are on offer? Is there a waiting list? How much do they cost? Which organisations run them? When do they start (some schools don't run these for Reception age children)?
- How is technology used in this school?

What to ASK Students



At primary level, you might not have many opportunities to speak to children directly. Obviously, the type of questions you ask will be dictated by the age of the children (if any) you come in to contact with.

- What is the best thing about this school?
- What do you do at lunch time?
- What are you proud of so far this year?
- Have you been on any trips?
- What are you learning about at the moment?

NEXT STEPS



YOUR TEN QUESTIONS



This guide contains a lot of questions - too many to ask during one visit.

My suggestion is to make a list of TEN questions you want to explore on your visit.

I would get the email address of the leader in charge of the visit to ask any follow-up questions - you can then reflect and then get the next wave of information.

MY QUESTION PLAN

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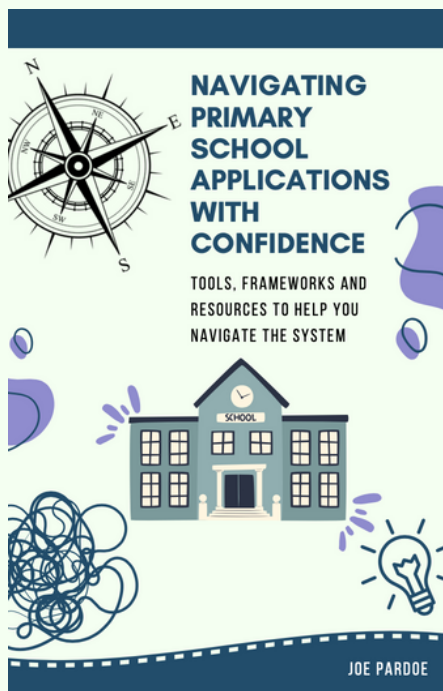
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What next...?

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 online course](#) takes you through everything in much more depth.



The course 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:

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