

eGuide

***TOP 10 TIPS ON HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT
SENIOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD***

(including 30 point questionnaire for school visit)

Best Senior Schools

From

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UK Senior Schools

This eGuide is divided into 4 parts

- *An introduction*
- *Brief list of Top 10 Tips*
- *Detailed explanation of Top 10 Tips*
- *30 point checklist to take on school visits*

If you are experienced in private education or have little time, you may wish to just consider only the second and fourth sections

UK Senior Independent Schools – An Introduction

Before we get to our top 10 tips, a few words about UK senior schools. There are around 700 independent senior schools. The majority cater for the senior life stage (11 to 18) but some of the boys traditional public schools start at age 13.

Schools may be day schools or boarding or both. If you are seeking a boarding school, we recommend you transfer to the best boarding schools eGuide.

There are boys only, girls only and co-educational senior schools, according to your preference.

Senior schools range from the huge well known public schools like Eton or Millfield (with nearly 2,000 pupils) to the large ex Grammars or High Schools (which often have 1,000 pupils) to more modest senior schools (with less than 400 pupils) There is nothing wrong with a smaller school, but you need to be sure it offers a reasonably good selection of A level subjects. If there are less than 30 pupils in one year of the sixth form, there may be a restricted subject choice. Some senior schools have no sixth form at all and pupils may have to transfer elsewhere.

There are numerous factors by which you can judge a senior school – not just academic success, but let's start by outlining our top 10 Tips before going into detail and then ending up with a 30 point questionnaire you can take on the visits to your short list schools.

1. Does the school fit the basic requirements of you and your child?

- Age range, gender, religious denomination, type of qualifications to be achieved, subjects offered

- Day/boarding pupil mix – if you want a day basis, don't pick a school with too many boarders
2. **Will your child be happy there?**
 - Ethos, style, academic or broad range, teaching style, special interests
 3. **Does it have a good academic track record?**
 - Exam success, high or low pressure environment, leaver destinations, teaching quality
 4. **The Sixth Form.**
 - What subjects are offered?
 - Careers and HE Guidance
 - Leavers' destinations
 5. **Do you like the ethos of school?**
 - Invariably set by the Head
 6. **What are the school standards like?**
 - Can you see the inspection report?
 - What is the school approach to discipline?
 7. **Does the school have the facilities your child needs?**
 - Swimming pool, theatre, music etc
 8. **Does it have extra curricular activities your child would use?**
 - Range of activities, costs
 9. **Is the location optimum for you?**
 - How important is area?
 10. **Does it give YOU value for money for what you want?**
 - Value for service delivered, fit with your budget, extras

1. Your basic requirements

1.1 Starting Age

The main part of the www.best-schools.co.uk website concentrates on senior schools, which take entry from age 11 or 13 (and also at 16) because it is only in this category we can measure exam success.

The majority of senior schools state that their admissions procedure requires the successful passing of the Common Entrance Exam, typically taken in January for admission the following September at age 11, 12 or 13. Be sure they are well prepared for it and find out what the pass mark will be – it can vary from 45% to 75%. However, there are often special admission processes for sixth form entry and International pupils. Talk to us on 0845 26 28 20 if you have a problem.

Note that most senior schools will take pupils into any year as long as they have vacancies and can be sure your child is up to their academic standard.

1.2 Gender

There are of course girls only and boys only school, but there is a definite trend to go co-ed. The arguments rage about the merits of single sex education with many Heads claiming there is no difference in academic achievement in single sex schools.

However, this is a difficult premise to support, when there is very strong evidence that girls only schools do produce the best A level performance.

A significant number of single sex schools have been converting to co-ed in their sixth forms on the basis that it is time to prepare students for the reality of the outside world. However, a politically incorrect view is that some single sex schools have been losing so many pupils at age 16 (because the pupils themselves harass their parents to transfer to co-ed schools) that they have had no option but to go co-ed because of the commercial pressures. Of course, almost all single sex schools arrange social functions and also sometimes mixed lessons with neighbouring schools of the opposite gender.

At the end of the day, this is very much down to parent's preferences. Do not be afraid to discuss the subject with the school on your visit.

1.3 Religious Denomination

Most schools will originally start from one faith – you will find Church of England, Roman Catholic, Quaker, Methodist, Jewish and Muslim etc. You will also find that most schools will accept pupils of any faith. If your views are particularly strong, then discuss them with the school. For example if you are CoE sending your child to a Catholic School, they will likely insist all pupils will attend Mass.

There are an increasing number of Muslim schools, but still relatively few at the senior school life stages.

In this day and age, most schools are becoming non denominational and respecting all faiths.

1.4 Subjects taught

At the younger life stages, this is not much of an issue, except for those opting for the International Baccalaureate.

By the age of 14 or 15, strengths or preferences are beginning to emerge, particularly with a view to A level choices, university and career aspirations.

The typical school might offer between 20 to 28 different A level subjects – the larger the school, generally the larger the options.

Most schools are going to offer all of the academic subjects, but they may not offer say - particular languages or performing arts subjects. If your child is old enough to have particular aspirations, it is not difficult to find a school with the required subjects, but all is not lost if the interest develops later on – it is quite easy to transfer to an independent sixth form college at 16 or 17 (see www.sixth-form.com)

1.5 Proportion of day and boarding pupils

If you are looking to put a child on a day basis in to a school which also offers boarding we would recommend caution if more than 50% are boarding, because your child may miss out on lessons and activities for the boarders.

2. Will your child be happy?

2.1 How will you know if your child will be happy?

Of course, it is vital that your child is happy. Of course, you are not going to know the answer until after they get there – so what can you do?

If in doubt, let your child speak to other pupils at the school.

If you visit say three schools, he or she will inevitably have a preference. In most cases they will be stamping their feet and proclaiming “I want to go to that one!” – usually the one which stretches your pocket the most with the Olympic sized swimming pool and equestrian centre!

(Tip No 1 – if you really cannot afford it – don’t visit – because junior does not usually appreciate the depth of your wallet!

Tip No 2 – if you are financially stretched, take a look at www.education-fees.co.uk)

See as much of each school as you can and go on a normal school day.

3. Academic Track Record

3.1 How do you assess exam performance?

Today we are all getting used to the idea that school examination results, at both GCSE and Advanced Level, get better every year. How difficult it is therefore for parents, viewing the various published league tables each August to decide whether or not a school is good, bad or indifferent. One reason for this is that there is no overall consistency in the way that results are collated and league positions calculated. There is also the usual annual moan about standards and how each record-breaking set of results only proves that it is becoming easier to pass exams and obtain high grades.

There are many factors that parents may take into account when trying to choose what they consider to be the ‘*best school*’ for their children. However, the truth is that there is no school that is best for every child. We can look at exam successes to determine which is the “*best school measured by academic achievements*”, but the real challenge for parents is to choose the “*right school*” which will take into account lots of factors in addition to exam results and we will come back to these later.

However, academic results can be tabulated and that is where most parents start their evaluation. It is not possible to have an endless list of criteria, and perhaps the most common approach is to look at the academic standing of a school and judge whether or not it meets the expectations of parents. Certainly there are other factors that parents might wish to see, such as sports facilities, strong departments in the creative and performing arts and perhaps the provision of special needs teaching. However, for

the purpose of the league tables on this website, we have taken strictly academic criteria and applied them to produce lists of best schools in terms of academic success. We feel that this is a good starting point for parents setting out to choose a school for their children, *as long as they are academically gifted*. Remember that not all children will thrive in highly focused academic environment and you could be doing your child a disservice simply by trying to pick a school with the best exam results – we will revert to this point later.

3.2 How the www.best-schools.co.uk League Tables Work

The different variables that make up the current league tables can be confusing and incomprehensible for parents trying to decide on the best school for their child. We exclude schools who have entered less than 20 candidates for A levels and also give extra weighting to schools which achieve good results with a large number of candidates. The league tables can vary dramatically from one year to the next. We give extra weighting to schools which show consistency.

For 2006, we will publish different league tables A levels, GCSEs and UCAS tariffs.

This website aims to publish all exam results in a factual way, but we also publish **our own www.best-schools.co.uk Top 100**. Education Advisers Limited have taken five criteria and given them a specific weighting with regard to examination results at both GCSE and Advanced Level. We believe that the vast majority of parents send their children to UK independent schools in order to prepare them for entry to a University. Therefore we start with the biggest weighting given to the average number of UCAS points achieved by pupils in a school (excluding General Studies). Then we add the percentage of A and B grade passes as a proportion of the total A-Level entry for a school plus the percentage of A* and A passes at GCSE Level as a proportion of the total number of GCSE's taken by a school. We finish by adding weightings for the entry candidates for A-Levels plus consistency, measured in exam success.

3.3 A-Level and the International Baccalaureate

Debate about the competing merits of A Levels and the International Baccalaureate (IB) has intensified in 2006 as North London Collegiate and Sevenoaks School have topped several league tables by offering the IB Diploma Program. Schools that offer the IB examination, and there are about 39 of these in the independent sector, say that the broad curriculum helps to effectively differentiate between the performance of individual entrants. In 2006 UCAS finally published a UCAS tariff equivalent for IB grades, but this will not take effect till 2008. Some say the IB grades 6 and 7 equate to A level A and Bs, whereas other maintain that it should IB grades 5, 6 and 7 are a fairer comparison. The truth is probably somewhere in between and in event the measures will change as marking parameters change in future years. For the time being we are using 6 and 7.

Be aware that most schools offering the IB ONLY offer the Diploma Programme for the sixth form.

Most universities happily accept IB students from outside of the UK and are equally happy to take UK IB exams. Some have said they believe the IB is a better standard of exam than A levels. However, be aware that some universities specifically require A-Levels in preference to IB for certain degree courses, particularly in the sciences. Parents should ensure that they check carefully with admission requirements for their children's chosen universities, should this be an issue.

3.4 What the League Tables do and do not tell you

Some schools have remarkable exam success rates. However, bear in mind that most of these schools are extremely selective in their entry criteria, whether that is applied at entry ages 11/13 or 16. Indeed it stands to reason that if the 6th form intake will only allow GCSE passes of say at least 6 As and 2 Bs, they are going to get good A level results – but, your child may not gain entry to the school in the first place. Also, if your child is at the bottom end of the academic spectrum, he or she may struggle to keep up the pace with other bright children.

Be aware that some schools do adopt strategies to get themselves higher up the league tables, such as. 1. Only allowing grade As at GCSEs to take A levels, 2 Forcing low grade GCSE performers to pay for their own exam entries for A levels to remove them from the school results. 3. Offering very large scholarships to very bright GCSE candidates from other schools. You can't really fault a school for wanting a good academic record. However, the biggest problem is if YOUR child fails to get the GCSE grades required to progress to the sixth form. Be sure to ask in advance of the school practice and get it in writing. We get numerous requests from parents who find themselves in exactly this situation.

Quite a few independent schools have specialist units for children with special needs such as dyslexia. It could be surmised that the inclusion of such children “dilute” their overall results. Interestingly, this is not usually the case. The mere fact that such schools devote more time to small group tuition usually benefits the rest of the children and everybody's standards rise at the same time.

It could be said that it is easier to achieve higher results with a very small sixth form, which is why we do weight our ratings for larger schools. There is nothing wrong with a small school, but you do need to ensure the school offers a sufficiently wide A level subject choice. Most schools in our tables offer between 20 to 25 A Level subjects. If a school is offering 15 or less, they will likely be the staple courses like mathematics, chemistry etc and you might need to go elsewhere for modern subjects.

School results can vary dramatically from year to year – so, how consistent are their results? Our own top 100 is a composite evaluation and therefore will not change as much as individual tables. If you go to a school website, they will often reveal their results for 5 years or more.

4. The Sixth Form

4.1 Subjects

Even if your child is joining at 11, most parents would like to see their child progress to a good University. At age 11 very few children will have any idea of what subjects they will do for A level, what career they want to follow and whether they even want to go to University. Nevertheless, more than 95% of children in most independent schools will apply for University – so you should ensure your chosen school is going to give your child the best chance of getting into University, after they have decided what to do.

The sixth form needs to have a wide selection of subjects – at least 20. In case your child turns out to be less academic, you might want to ensure that there is an adequate choice of more practical subjects such as Art, Design Technology, Photography or Media Studies.

4.2 Careers and Higher Education Guidance

Does the school maintain a dedicated adviser for both university advice and careers guidance. Do they have a special library facility? Do they groom students who will need to be interviewed for Oxbridge or medical degrees?

4.3 Leavers Destinations

What proportion of 6th form leavers go to University? How many of them get into Russell Group Universities?

5. Ethos of School

5.1 Ethos

Every independent school establishes its own ethos, which can best be evaluated by observing the behaviour of pupils both in and out of class. Are they well behaved in class? Were they working hard? Did they greet you in a polite way? Do they look happy? Are they neat and tidy?

If a school follows a particular religious denomination, that will heavily influence the school ethos. However, the most important factor is the Head, because he or she sets the entire tone for the school. You will only find out by meeting the Head and asking lots of questions, after which you will know if you like the ethos or not!

5.2 School Discipline

Areas such as the school policy on discipline can be an important consideration when you are trying to choose between schools. There can be very big differences between schools with a highly traditional approach and those that put the emphasis on self-development and learning by experience. What you will find is that there is generally a more structured environment in independent schools than in the state sector, but nevertheless quite big differences exist, as for example between schools such as Bedales and Milton Abbey on the one hand, and traditional schools like Wellington and Winchester on the other.

Only you can be the judge of what you prefer for your children. You should have that discussion with the Head of the schools you approach.

6. School Standards

6.1 School Inspection Report

It is of course important to have confidence in the standards being set by any school that you are considering for your child. In the independent sector all schools are regularly inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, which carries out the policies laid down by OFSTED and the DfES. If you want to check on a school you can go to the ISI website at <http://www.isinspect.org.uk> where you are able to obtain reports. This will tell you a great deal about a school, its teaching and academic standards as well as its educational philosophy and its extra-curricular provision.

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7. School Facilities

7.1 School Facilities

Today most schools in the independent sector spend a great deal of their budgets on the fabric of their buildings and in providing outstanding facilities for their pupils. Parents should ask to see the school library and enquire about the sports area and whether or not the school has a sports hall. Most schools today have well-equipped IT centres but parents should also ask about the provision of computers in boarding houses, as well as in teaching departments. If your child is interested in the creative arts you should ask to see the Art School and find out whether computers are used in graphic design and what different types of materials can pupils use in their studies.

Many schools offer enrichment programmes, which is sometimes called General Studies. This can be a mixture of examined and non-examined study, but its common feature is that it offers a range of life skill subjects, such as motorbike maintenance, debating, yoga, musical appreciation and the like. Some schools will have an extensive programme for Duke of Edinburgh awards while others will have a Combined Cadet

Force. These can be very important to a pupil when applying for university as it enables them to say quite a lot about themselves on the UCAS form outside the confines of A-Level subjects.

7.2 Special facility schools

There are 5 specialist music schools – Chetham’s, Yehudi Menuhin School, Purcell School, Wells Cathedral School and St Mary’s School, Edinburgh.

Many schools offer the Performing Arts but the 3 which specialise in ballet are the Royal Ballet School, Elmhurst School for Performing Arts and the Arts Educational School in Tring.

Many boarding schools will cater for children with special needs (such as dyslexia). However, there is a difference between those which accept wholly special needs pupils and those who accept a minority of say 10% of total pupils.

8. Extra Curricular Activities

8.1 Variety of activities

Many independent schools offer a huge range of activities – from sports to arts to music to outward bound courses. Millfield, a very large school, is famed for offering a choice of 80 right down to Zulu bead working – although we don’t know how many Zulu bead specialists they turn out!

The point is that that opportunities are invariably extensive – as long as you realise you are going to pay an extra fee for most of them – if not for the teacher, then for the equipment.

Sports and music are always well catered for – in contrast to the diminishing availability in state schools.

A school will always provide you with a list of their activities and for those with a rather anxious child, it is a way of motivating them to overcome their reservations.

9. Location

9.1 Where to choose?

With 2,300+ independent schools of which about 700 are senior schools, there are choices in every county. There tend to be more schools in the South, simply because international pupils are important to many boarding schools and thus a location within 50 miles of Heathrow or Gatwick Airports may be preferable. With air, road and train travel being so efficient in the UK, it really does not matter where a boarding school is situated, unless of course you are a UK resident using flexi boarding. Such parents

can find a suitable school within easy travelling distance of home and many private schools offer a minibus service

Many International parents will begin their search in London (as the place they know best) but you should be aware that there are very few boarding schools in London itself. However there are many in the Home Counties within a 50 mile radius of London. If in doubt, fill in the consultancy enquiry form on www.best-schools.co.uk

If you are seeking a private sixth form college (see www.sixth-form.com) these are mostly centred on London, Cambridge and Oxford. Most will have boarding accommodation, but it is mainly either university style halls of residence or home stay with local families.

10. Value for Money

UK Senior Schools at senior level can cost anywhere from £8,000 to £17,000 for day schools or £15,000 to £27,000 per annum for boarding. Those near to London or well known public boarding schools are mostly in excess of £20,000 per annum.

We have included school fees in the league table, but only for the top ranked schools.

Parents should also take into account the other costs, or ‘extras’, that can add a substantial amount to your bill.

School uniform and kit for school games is probably the first of these extras that you will encounter, and this is usually an unavoidable cost. However, you should ask how inclusive the fees are and what extra costs are likely to be incurred. For example music lessons and school trips are not usually included in the fees, neither are school textbooks and essential stationery. There will also be some subjects, such as Home Economics, and A-Level Theatre Studies that can add sizeable amounts to your bill because of the nature of these courses.

It has been estimated that extras can add between 5% and 15% to the school fees you are paying, so it is always wise to ask for a complete breakdown of fees and extras when considering a particular school.

If you are a non UK resident, you also have travel costs home during the holidays or extra accommodation and guardianship fees.

Whilst you can be surprised by the size of boarding fees, do not forget to take into account the other costs you are saving – the daily home taxi service ferrying children to and from school, meals at home, heating, light or telephone bills!

It is wise to check out costs **before** you visit any school.

Most schools offer a limited number of bursaries and scholarships. However, beware that most schools are oversubscribed with applications for admission and always receive more requests for such discounts than they have places available.

For UK residents who are higher rate taxpayers, please check out www.education-fees.co.uk for ways to reduce your cost.

Most interested parents are committed to an independent education as long as it fits their budget. However, we all want to feel we are getting value for money. Part of this evaluation is to compare what one school provides against another in relation to cost.

Some extra issues for International Parents

1 English Language

UK boarding schools will expect you child to speak English reasonably fluently on arrival. However a number of schools will be able to provide additional English Language tuition so that they can cope with the school curriculum.

If your child speaks little or no English, it will be better for them to start in an International Study Centre to prepare them for entry into a mainstream boarding school.

2. International Admissions

As you will already have read, most UK children gain entry to senior independent boarding schools by passing The Common Entrance Exam, which typically only take place in January or February.

International students will often be considered for admission on the basis of existing school reports, a reference from their previous Head plus an Interview. Sometimes a school might wish the child to sit a test on the visit to the school. Some schools might be prepared to allow that test to be taken on the previous school's premises.

UK schools will want to ensure that the pupil fits in with the academic standard of the pupils they will be joining.

So, how do you decide? What next?

After researching the school profiles, forming a short list and requesting brochures, get yourself a questionnaire to evaluate your shortlist during school visits. We give you our own free questionnaire in the appendix to this eGuide.

If you are a UK resident, never forget to ask the Head of your child's existing school. He or she will likely know the local schools which will suit both your child's academic progress and temperament.

There is absolutely no substitute for a personal visit – did you like the school, the premises, the facilities, the atmosphere, the headmaster, the teachers and the manner

of the pupils? You will be invited to attend on an Open Day, but is it possible to visit on a normal school day, when you can experience the daily routine?

Lastly, after doing all of your research, go back to basics. The real starting point for choosing a school has to begin with you and your hopes and aspirations for your children. You know them better than anyone else and can best judge their strengths and weaknesses. You are in the best position to know what type of school will work best for them. Although your schooldays were some time ago, the essentials in the 21st Century remain the same as when you were at school. Literacy and numeracy plus knowing the difference between right and wrong count for as much in the modern world as they did when you were a schoolchild. You need to match the qualities you consider right for education with those offered by the *right school*.

It's a huge decision. If you need help, then avail yourself of our bespoke consultancy service <http://www.best-schools.co.uk/expert-assistance.aspx>

APPENDIX



The Education Advisers 30 Point Check List

**Questions and Points to consider
for Parents
in choosing an Independent Senior School**

**A Check-List of Recommended Questions from the Parent's Perspective
Note – this is an *aide-memoire* to help you to remember what to ask.**

1. Is this school ideally suited to the academic aspirations, which you have for your child?
 - Common Entrance Exam to gain access to Senior School?
 - GCSEs?
 - GCE A Level and Advanced Subsidiary?
 - GNVQs and Vocational A levels?
 - International Baccalaureate?
 - An all round quality education?
2. What are the entrance criteria? Will your child have to sit tests or the Common Entrance Exam? What are the pass marks?
3. Would your child be better suited to an academic environment (with emphasis on traditional subject tuition in a disciplined environment) or a less academic approach (with opportunity to excel in skilled crafts, sports or the performing arts)?
4. What is the School Curriculum? Is it the National Curriculum or wider – if so, how? Does it offer your child a sufficiently wide and balanced choice? If you are contemplating switching your child back to the State sector later, what are the implications?
5. *For boarders* Make sure you visit the dormitories or boarding bedrooms and the common areas? Are the facilities modern and comfortable or spartan like an outward bound course? Can the children personalise their space with their own mementos?
6. *For boarders* Make sure you meet the Housemaster/mistress. How do they get on with the pupils? What arrangements are made for boarders at weekends? What are the activities? Are children allowed into the local town- accompanied or unaccompanied?
7. *For boarders* Would you consider weekday boarding and weekends at home? Does the school offer taster day boarding for your child to find out?
8. Do you need guardianship – will the school provide/arrange for this?
9. What are meals like? Do they adopt a well balanced and healthy diet?
10. Do you and your child want single sex or co educational schooling? If co-ed, what is the male:female ratio? Is the smaller gender group well integrated into the activities of the whole school?

11. What are the costs (compare them with your short list)?
 - Per term
 - Boarding
 - Meals
 - Extra curricular subject charges
 - Uniform – what is compulsory?
 - Kit
 - Musical instruments
 - Books
 - Other typical extras
12. Are there bursaries or scholarships which might be applicable to you? What are the criteria? Is there published information?
13. What are the qualifications and experience of teachers? What is the turnover of teaching staff?
14. What are the examination successes track record?
15. Will your child have to sit an entrance examination? Is there a waiting list? Is it first come – first served?
16. If you are considering a prep school from which your child will switch to senior elsewhere, what is the success record on Common Entrance exams. What proportion of children get their first choice senior school?
17. Did you like the Head? Did you feel you received straight answers to your questions? What are his/her principles, policies and obsessions? How do the pupils react to the Head – respect? warmth? fear? Did the Head take an interest in YOUR child?
18. Did you like the other staff you met?
19. What is the school attitude to parental contact, especially in Boarding School? How often are parent's meetings? Is there a Parents' Association? Is there a regular newsletter? How are the parents advised or consulted with on disciplinary matters?
20. What is the typical class size for the various age ranges? Ask to see some of the children's current workbooks.
21. How much has the school invested in technology? What are its ICT facilities? Does it teach pupils how to use up to date software? Do pupils get their own email addresses? What does its own website look like? Does it communicate with parents by email?
22. What quality of facilities does the school have?

- Main buildings
 - Classrooms
 - Hall
 - Accommodation
 - Sports
 - Arts
 - Drama
 - Computing
 - Media
23. What is the school approach to discipline? Is it published? Will it suit your child's temperament? Does it match your own views?
24. Are there sets of published Rules – e.g discipline, bullying, drug abuse, dress code?
25. Is religious affiliation important? Are aspects of religion compulsory?
26. What proportion of 6th formers go to university? What are their destinations? Does the school have dedicated higher education and careers advisers?
27. Ask to see the Regulator's school inspection reports
28. Ask to see the latest annual financial report (is it adequately funded to attract quality teachers and expand facilities if necessary?)
29. What was your gut feeling on a personal visit on a normal school day?
- The staff
 - The premises
 - The facilities
 - The atmosphere
 - The pupils
30. What did you think of the children? Were they happy? Were they well mannered? Did they rush about ? Were they neatly dressed in school uniform? Were they polite to teachers and visitors alike?

