



When it comes to making the all-important decision of which senior school to choose for your child, there can seem to be an endless number of options:

- Single-sex or co-ed
- Day or boarding
- Academic focus or emphasis on sports and extracurricular activities
- State school or private school
- Highly pastoral or not
- Saturday school or not

Even if there's one senior school that you know most people from their primary school go to, even if your child already has an older sibling at a certain school, or even if sending your child to one school seems the best option initially, there are so many different aspects of a school that should be considered before making a final choice.

In this section, we'll run you through some of these dilemmas and how to potentially overcome them. It is important you always retain perspective and don't let stories from friends or the internet cloud your vision.



Research

A great starting point is researching some of the schools in your local area. Have a look on their websites and their social media pages to see if they are publicising certain aspects of school life that appeal to your child. For example, if academic success is important to you, you can find out about GCSE and A Level results, which are usually published every year. Do not rule a school out just on the results; each year is different so context is vital in this situation.

Schools might also post sports results online, something you or your child can check out if they enjoy their sport.

However, you should be careful with school websites as they will try and make their school sounds as good as possible to try and encourage you to go there. For example, a particular school might use statistics to try and make their school sound as good as possible. This could include using old data or twisting data to sounds better than it actually is.

School Visits

When you've assembled a shortlist of schools, start to think about going to open days or arranging a visit to each school. Most secondary schools will advertise open day dates online. Open days allow you to look around a school, check out its facilities and meet some of its teachers and pupils. Each department will put on activities and demonstrations which can evoke vast enjoyment in children. The atmosphere around a school at an open day is

something that can make a certain school jump out from the others. Make sure your child gets fully involved in the activities to experience what the school is like.

However, do be cautious with open days. Schools are putting on their very best performance in order to encourage you to go to their school and therefore open days are not always a good representation of the day to day life of a pupil. For example, in the chemistry department, many teachers blow up jelly babies, a fun activity which will undoubtedly not be a usual feature of generic school life. The food is also another example of this; open day food will be excellent but that does not mean normal school food is of the same standard.

Visits during a school day are also great at helping you decide which schools to apply to. You'll be given a more realistic insight into how the school functions on a regular day. It's a good opportunity to ask questions as well. These could range from school lunches, individual music lessons, extra-curricular opportunities, or environmental matters. You may like to consider asking how pupils get to school every morning. Many schools offer buses in the morning, others do not, and pupils utilise public transport: trains and buses. Of course, there is the option of being driven in by car; taking public transport, however, can develop independence in a child who may have never taken the train or bus on their own before. It's a great opportunity to catch up with friends at the end of a day.

We also recommend talking to your tour guide and using them as the base of your knowledge. They will give you the most honest and forthright insight to the school.



Types of School

If you're debating about sending your child to a single-sex or co-ed school, both do have advantages over the other. Co-ed schools reflect the real world: all companies employ people of both sexes and being educated in a co-ed school is a great way of preparing your child for when they enter the workplace environment in the future. Having said that, some people argue that learning in a single-sex environment allows for greater focus on academic work and can lead to higher results. Others disagree and think single-sex schools limit social skills. Many single-sex schools actually join up with another nearby single-sex school of the opposite sex for extra-curricular activities, such as choirs and orchestras, and school trips, thus mitigating this issue. Experiencing and visiting both can be of real benefit to see what each type offers.

There are also schools which are initially single-sex from years 7-11, but then turn co-ed for sixth form. These may provide the best from both worlds. As you can see, there isn't really a right or wrong answer.

There is a wide variety of different schools and you should have a detailed discussion with your child about whether they would prefer co-ed or single sex schools or something in between. If unsure, it is always a good idea to speak with your child's teachers and especially headmaster – they will have valuable opinions regarding their options.

It may well be the same regarding day and boarding schools. Some of the options here include:

- **Day** – pupils come to school at the start of the day and leave at the end at the same times each day from Monday to Friday (although these would change if there was an activity on after school). Some schools also hold sports fixtures midweek and on Saturdays.
- **Weekly boarding** – pupils come to school on Monday and stay there until Friday, taking weekends off (apart from weekend sports fixtures).
- **Flexi-boarding** – pupils occasionally stay at school, but not all the time.
- **Full boarding** – pupils stay at school all the time, taking half-terms, holidays and the odd weekend off.

Boarding allows for children to mature independently. There are greater opportunities for sports and activities at school and it saves parents the hassle of having to pick their child up from school every day. Boarding could be a better option if the school is relatively far from your home. Some schools offer a taster boarding experience if you remain undecided. However, do bear in mind that boarding can make a relationship difficult to maintain with your child simply due to lack of quality time spent with them. Whilst it is vital that your children learn to gain some independence, boarding is a big step for your children and so they have to be absolutely sure they are ready to make that jump.

Day schools may feel more familiar to your child as it is what they're used to. Children cannot truly flourish at school if they feel too homesick or demotivated. Once again, consulting your child to see what they think is crucial in making this decision.

Another choice to make is about sending your child to a state or a private (independent) school. Many children stay in the same type of school as their primary school, but it's not uncommon to go from a private primary school to a state secondary or vice versa. This choice may depend on the range of subjects a school offers: private schools may offer subjects like Latin or Greek for GCSE, whereas they might not offer subjects such as business. These are only examples, so it is crucial to find out with specific schools. Also, it's a good idea to find out the subjects that a school offers not only for GCSEs and A Levels, but also for before it gets to that stage.

It is not worth listing the advantages and disadvantages of state schools over private schools because it varies from school to school. Some areas have fantastic state schools and some only have failing state schools. It is simply down to the area that you live in.

If debating state vs private schools, the best thing to do is to compare each school individually and make a judgement call. Use the other resources we have suggested to compare each school.

When you've narrowed down your list, you must pick the number of schools you apply for. Obviously, picking more schools gives you and your child more choice, but it does mean that they have to take exams at multiple schools. Most people opt for three or four schools, although it isn't rare to apply for fewer or more than this.

We would recommend that you definitely apply for more than one school. It would be devastating to place all your hopes on one school and for your child to not get in. Even if you are confident that your child will get into a certain school, just in case, apply for another. The exam for the second choice can always be a practice!

The most important thing during all this is observing whether your child is taking an interest in the schools that you are considering and making sure that you are asking for their opinion. Ultimately, it's the school that they are going to and their future in education. You must also trust your instinct so that the school/schools you apply for are tailored towards your child's strengths and skills. A student works better in an environment where they feel comfortable and welcome.

