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Choosing a **secondary school**

department for
education and skills

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AT A GLANCE



How to choose a secondary school for your child

- It's important to start preparing your choice of secondary school early, so that you can make the best decision for your child.
- There are different kinds of school, often with different rules for admitting pupils. If you have a school in mind, ask what its admission criteria are before making an application.
- Local authorities handle applications for state schools. For independent (private) schools, you should apply directly to the school.
- Don't just go for a school that you think has a good reputation. Ask what is best for your child, and take time to discuss schools with them.
- Research schools in your area carefully, using a variety of sources. The tips in this leaflet will help you compare different schools, so that you know you are making the right choice.
- You have a right to state what your preferred schools are when you apply for places. But that school may not be able to give your child a place as some schools have more applications than they do places.
- If you are unhappy with the place your child is offered, you can appeal. The letter you get about your application will tell you what to do.

Did you know?

If your child will start secondary school in September 2006, you should apply for a place before Christmas of this year – usually by late October. Check with your local authority what its closing date is.

Planning and preparing for secondary school

If your child's time at primary school comes to an end next summer, then this autumn term is the time to start thinking about what secondary school you want them to go to.

Why start thinking now? Because your child won't automatically be given a place at your local secondary school. You have to apply.

The law says that your child has a right to a place at a school, and you have the right to say what school you'd like them to attend. But that doesn't mean that you will be offered a place at your favourite school.

There's a lot to think about. Start planning now and there's less chance that you'll miss the deadline for applications and find that all the places at your favourite school have been taken.

Do you need a helping hand to make sense of what's on offer? Then this leaflet is for you. It covers:

- **the different kinds of school you can choose**
- **thinking about your child's needs**
- **finding out about schools you're interested in**
- **how to apply for a place.**

The different types of school

Choosing a secondary school for your child is one of the most important decisions that you will make for them. So it's a good idea to know about the different kinds of schools you can choose from. This way, you can think about what sort of school is right for your child – and for you.

State schools

Over 90% of children go to state schools, which are free. They are all over the country and open to children from all backgrounds.

You will come across different kinds of state school:

- community schools
- foundation schools
- voluntary-aided schools
- voluntary-controlled schools.

All state schools get all or part of their funds from a local authority and have to follow the National Curriculum. But there are differences in the way they are managed and often in the rules they have for offering places to pupils. It's a good idea to ask schools what rules they use.

Most state schools do not offer places based on a child's ability, but a few schools – such as grammar schools – select pupils in this way.

Local authorities have responsibility for handling applications to all state schools and Academies, and in some areas, City Technology Colleges.

Independent schools

Independent schools are also known as private schools. They are paid for by the parents and do not have to follow the National Curriculum. Private schools can also decide how to run their own affairs and which pupils they will accept. So if you're thinking about private education for your child, it's important to check the school can give them what they need.

What's best for your child?

When you want the best for your child, it's easy to think that you just need to look for a school with a good reputation. But your child's needs are just as important. If a school is popular but your child is unhappy there, it may not be right. It's worthwhile asking yourself these five questions before you even start looking at different schools.

1. What school does your child prefer?

You might not approve of their choice. But ask them why they want to go there, and you'll find out what's important to them.

2. Where are their friends going?

Is this an opportunity to make new friends, or will your child be better off staying with their old schoolmates?

3. Does your child need special attention? If your child is particularly bright or has special needs, it's important to choose a school that can handle them.

4. Is there one subject your child is best at? Or do they have particular interests – such as sports, language or music? Can you find a school that is strong in this area? Some specialist schools focus on one subject but still follow the National Curriculum.

5. How will your child get to school safely? Think about trips to and from school on cold winter mornings and evenings. Will the journey be safe?

Remember...

...what suits one child can be wrong for another. So it's best not to compare your child with their friends and classmates.

Making a decision

Try not to make a decision about a school without finding out as much as you can about it – even if it's been top of your list of favourites for a while. Don't automatically write off a school on the basis of what others have said until you've seen it yourself. Schools can change fast, so you should always check how one school compares to others in your area. Ask friends and family how their children got on at their schools. Or follow our tips below.

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Practical tips

- **Contact your local authority.** They will give you a brochure with details of all the schools in your area.
- **Find out what the school is looking for.** Read the school's admission arrangements carefully – you'll find them in the local authority's brochure or, in many cases, on their website. Every school will give priority to some applications over others: to those with a brother or sister in the school or to people who attend a certain type of church for example. Sometimes living near a school is not enough to be able to go there. Know what different schools are looking for, so that you don't name schools on your application form that are very popular and likely to fill with people who have higher priority than your child.
- **Read OFSTED reports.** OFSTED (the Office for Standards in Education) inspects and monitors how well schools are performing. Every school is inspected and receives a report on their progress, which you can read. Visit www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports to find reports for your local schools.
- **Visit the school.** This is a great way of seeing things for yourself. You can call a school to ask if they have open days for parents and children, or you can ask to visit the school.

- **Ask the school for a prospectus.** This is a brochure that tells you about the school and how it educates its pupils.
- **Look at school performance tables.** The Government publishes these every year. They tell you how well pupils did in exams at every school – and you can compare one school's results to others in your area and nationally. Visit www.dfes.gov.uk/performance for more information.

Information at your fingertips

If you have access to the internet, you might like to use the Find a school service on Directgov, the national public services website. Not only can you look for schools near you, you can see Ofsted reports and performance tables, and contact your local authority – all on one easy-to-use site. Many local authorities also accept applications online. Visit www.direct.gov.uk/educationandlearning

Remember...

...if you are applying for a place at an independent school, you should approach the school directly to find out how they process applications.

Applying for a place

So you've talked to your child, researched local schools and come to a decision about the school you want your child to go to. What next? If you are applying for a place at a state school, you should ask your local authority for an application form or advice on how to apply online. You can apply for at least three schools.

- Local authorities co-ordinate admissions for all state schools and Academies, and sometimes City Technology Colleges, in their area. This makes application easier – you just fill in one application and list your favourite schools in order of preference. The local authority then sends you a school place offer on 1 March.
- Where possible, this will be for your first-choice school, but it depends on whether your child meets their admission criteria. It is possible that your child may not be offered a place at any of your preferred schools, especially if you applied to very popular schools and didn't have a high priority compared with other applicants.
- But your local authority should offer you a place at another school, if they can't offer any of the schools you listed on the form.

If you're not happy with the place you're offered

Unfortunately, some schools have more applications than places, and they can't give a place to everybody who applies. So your child might be unlucky and not get the offer you want.

If this happens, and you've applied to a state school or an Academy, you can appeal. The letter you receive from your local authority with your offer should tell you what to do. An independent appeal panel will hear your case. If you're successful, your child will be offered a place. If not, you may ask if there is a waiting list you can join in case a place comes up – but be realistic as this may not happen.

If you are unhappy that a private school hasn't offered your child a place, you will need to approach the school with your complaint.

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Want to find out more?

www.direct.gov.uk/educationandlearning

Government portal that includes advice on finding a school for your child. Also has a Find a school service that allows you to see how well local schools perform.

www.parentscentre.gov.uk

Advice for parents with school-age children. Includes guidance on finding schools.

www.dfes.gov.uk/leagateway

Information on local authorities.

www.ofsted.gov.uk

Website for the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), which monitors schools and produces reports on their performance.

www.dfes.gov.uk/performanceables

Government performance tables, showing how well each school in the country did in national tests and exams.

Can't get onto the internet at home?

Visit your local library which will have computers and internet access.

Copies of this publication can be obtained from: DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.
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