

# How to get the school you want

Landing the right boarding school can entail visits, exams and interviews. **Helena Pozniak** guides you through the prep you will need to find the best

## PREPARATION

Popular boarding schools can become fully subscribed a couple of years in advance, while some schools can be flexible and admit boarders with a week's notice. Parents may want to get a head start by researching and visiting potential schools. "Visiting three to five schools as parents is ideal," says Nathaniel McCullagh, managing director of education specialists Simply Learning Tuition. "Then take your child to see your top two."

Study how children interact with older and younger pupils, advises Dick Jaine, headmaster of Sherfield School in Hampshire. "It's always useful to have a look around during a break to see how involved pupils are, and how they interact with staff in this more informal setting."

## PRE-TESTS AND INTERVIEWS

Some of the most competitive senior boarding schools may assess prospective pupils a couple of years before entrance exams, says Mr McCullagh, with pre-tests which pupils may take aged 10 (Year 6) if they are going for entry into senior school at 12 to 13. Schools may ask pupils and parents for an interview or a friendly chat, says Mr McCullagh, to find out about the child and how he or she would fit and possibly make further assessments. Pupils would still have to sit an entrance exam too, though more for streaming purposes.

"Oversubscribed boarding schools work hard to bring in the right pupils for the school," he says.

Some of the most competitive schools will see up to five students for every available place. Parents apply to individual schools, which usually ask for a registration fee or deposit of between £300 to £1,000. Some schools ask for acceptance fees, retained against the final term's bill, and ask parents to sign a contract.

## TAKING THE ENTRANCE EXAMS

Most schools ask pupils to sit an entrance exam, and schools can arrange these overseas if necessary.

Prep schools, for pupils aged seven to 10-plus, may hold formal tests in maths, English, perhaps reading and verbal reasoning, and also meet parents to find out more about prospective pupils - although relatively few children board at this



## APPLICATION CHECKLIST

- Research schools, looking at transport links, ethos and fit
- Ring up and enquire about applying for a place
- Visit schools, talk to pupils as well as teachers
- Ask about pastoral care and take your child to see your top two
- Attend interview if necessary, discuss child's needs with the head
- Register your interest and pay a deposit
- Prepare for and sit entrance exams or scholarship papers
- Complete paperwork to accept place
- Buy uniform and kit

age. "Country prep boarding schools are nurturing," says Mr McCullagh. These can be much less competitive than their London counterparts.

Boarding schools for students aged 11 to 18 will hold 11-plus entrance exams set by the Independent Schools Examinations Board (ISEB) for children in Year 6 (aged 10 to 11), sometimes in November but mostly in January. Girls and boys can both start senior school in Year 7 but mostly this exam is for girls heading to an all-girls senior school at 11.

All schools will test maths and English and probably verbal reasoning. Some schools interview top performers; results are released in February and parents are informed in March. And as early as Year 5, schools may assess pupils for admission in Year 7 or 9.

“ Schools may assess prospective pupils years before entrance exams

Meet and greet It is recommended that parents visit three to five schools rather than just rely on their reputations

Most boys go to senior boarding school at the age of 13, and will sit ISEB's three-hour Common Entrance Examination in Year 8 (aged 12 to 13), usually in May, for entry in Year 9. This exam tests literacy, numeracy and verbal and non-verbal reasoning, as well as science, language and humanities. Schools usually inform pupils in June or July whether they have been accepted.

## EXAM PREPARATION

Prep schools with links to boarding schools are usually good at prepping pupils for senior school exams, but some pupils may need extra help to understand what the exam entails.

If a child wants to join a boarding school at a later stage, staff may look at current school reports instead of requiring an exam.

## SCHOLARSHIPS AND BURSARIES

There are many scholarships and bursaries up for grabs. Pupils aiming for scholarships may take a different, harder exam, and have interviews with subject experts.

## VISITS AND LAST-MINUTE PREPARATIONS

Once a child has settled on a place, it's wise to visit, and even attend classes or an open day before the school year begins. Schools may also organise induction courses to give children a taste of dorm life. Parents will want to meet the future house master or house mistress, and it will help children to get to know teachers and fellow pupils. Schools usually arrange meetings with key members of staff and brief parents.