

A curse or a blessing?

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If you've chosen a secondary school for your child already, don't read this article. You are a lucky parent and probably a natural decision maker. For the rest of us the agony of deciding our children's future within the current educational variety and chaos is still ahead, whether our offspring is in year 1 or year 6. M&D guest and expert on the matter today is Claire Higham, a director of Select Education Centre in Alderley Edge.

Choosing a secondary school for a child is no easy task; there are so many factors to consider in addition to ensuring both the happiness and academic progression that one would want for one's child...

Naturally all parents want to do the best they can for their children, but there appears to be so much happening in education nowadays, so many subjects to squeeze into a crowded curriculum, so many examinations to check progress and use for league tables, that the choice available can be as much a curse as a blessing. Issues include the state school versus independent

school debate, whether to sit entrance examinations (and indeed, how many), what extra curricular activities are on offer, typical class sizes, where friends are going, reputation, not to mention distance and of course, cost. Put simply: the sheer variety of considerations can be overwhelming.

Parents question if it is right to put their child through so many potentially stress inducing entrance examinations, but may worry that without doing so their child could be academically disadvantaged and suffer from fewer opportunities later in life. In truth, there are children who

enjoy academic successes in every kind of school, the key is in understanding the specific needs of the child in question and where they and their parents feel they will flourish best.

The reality of making the choice can be much more straightforward as the options are not always as diverse as we might at first think. Schools do vary, as they always have and will, but while there may be subtle differences in the range of subjects offered, particularly as children progress through the year groups, all will offer the basics to include English, Maths and Science. For example, there are legal requirements for schools within the state system to teach minimum specific hours of certain subjects including Citizenship and PE so you can be assured that there will be many branches to your child's learning wherever they are.

It seems obvious, but the key to a successful choice can be influenced heavily by the needs and wishes of the child in question. Research has proven that all children learn in different ways, and indeed, at different rates. Therefore, a school which successfully advocates the use of a variety of teaching methods and resources can increase your child's chances of success. Substantial investment has been placed, particularly (but not exclusively) in many state schools in recent years, to improve the teaching resources, as well as training for the staff in how to utilise these effectively. Consequently many schools are now blazing a trail of success and accomplishment, in terms of catering for a variety of learning needs and styles.

Clearly class sizes can be very important, but in addition, good facilities really are a bonus; particularly if schools have invested in technologies around the buildings and not just in ICT suites. Appropriate application of items such as Interactive Whiteboards can bring learning 'alive' for children, and help to

embed knowledge in an exciting and engaging way. Similarly, good PE and music facilities can connect children more fully with school life, by providing them with enjoyment, achievement and a sense of involvement and belonging, which generally benefits their learning as a whole. Again, research proves that children who are involved in other activities (whether in or out of school) are often the most successful, possibly due to the fact that they become more adept at juggling the differing aspects of their lives at a young age.

Like it or not, some schools have a certain reputation which precedes them, whether good or bad - which can be misleading. Some have a fantastic range of facilities and a recently refurbished or even brand new building while others may look a little more down-at-heel, but could be staffed by fantastically inspiring teachers. Others will tempt you with a vast array of extra-curricular activities and life enhancing school trips to further enrich an education. Open days enable you to see what a school has to offer first hand and have discussions with members of staff. These are very useful but often a better informed judgment can be reached by additionally seeing a school 'in action' on a regular teaching day. This can be helpful in gaining a more realistic view of a school's ethos and can seriously help in forming an opinion and therefore coming to a decision.

Ultimately, to know absolutely what to do for the best is almost to be able to know when we will next have a long, fabulously sunny summer in Britain; in other words: almost impossible. In conclusion, the only thing we can ever do is to make the decision we feel is the correct one, at the time we make it, based upon the information we have gathered. Whether state school or independent, be assured that with the right support, a child can be happy and successful wherever he or she goes n