

If you thought choosing the right primary school was tough, forget it! Secondary school is where the real fun begins: will they be happy? Will they get bullied by the older children? How will they cope with the journey that entails two buses and a tube?

The Big Step up to Secondary School

(the children might find it hard too)

by Louise Campbell

With approximately 80,000 pupils transferring to secondary school each year, understanding the application system and the choices available is the first step in managing this often tricky transition. The good news is that at least one mother I spoke to did have an optimistic postscript to her personal journey, noting: "Most of the children are happy with where they end up, it's just a shame that it is all such a rigmarole."

The Pan London Scheme

The rigmarole was improved significantly with the introduction in 2005 of a co-ordinated admissions system across London. Designed to minimise the anxiety for parents and children and the

workload for schools, it is intended to be fairer, increasing the number of children being offered one of their preferred schools and reducing the number getting no initial offer at all.

Under the new scheme parents list the schools they want to apply for on one form, ranking them in order of preference and then returning the form to the council before a designated date in October.

Even so, some schools still operate their own criteria and dates for application. In Wandsworth these are the City Technology Colleges, like ADT College and, of course, independent schools. Some schools outside the borough, in addition to setting their own test, give priority to applicants who rank

their school first in their preferences, Wallington Grammar, for example.

Think Ahead

The general rule of thumb is to plan ahead. Start thinking about which secondary school/s you'd like your child to go to no later than Yr 5 and maybe start visiting a few.

Most independent schools work to roughly the same timescale. James Allen's Girls' School, in Dulwich, for example, requires that you register your daughter before the end of November in Yr 6. The entrance exam is the following January with up to 400 candidates chasing 112 places.

With such stiff competition, cramming is not unheard of. One parent, who wished



to remain anonymous, told me her daughter had had a tutor, twice a week, since she was seven - and she wasn't alone. When I spoke to JAGs Headmistress, Mrs Gibbs, she said they are well aware that cramming and tutoring goes on in a bid to boost a child's chances, and she warned against it. "It's sad when a child arrives at the school and clearly can't cope."

Is there any real choice?

For many families, despite the new system, children end up taking several tests set by different boroughs or schools. Even after going through all of that, some still end up without a place at any school during the first round of offers.

'The whole visiting schools thing encourages you to think that you have a choice,' says Susie, mother of Mark in Yr 6. We applied for six schools in order of preference and were only offered a place from the last school on the list.'

For lots of reasons, they were not happy with this particular local school and so Susie and her partner were told to keep ringing other schools to see where Mark was on their waiting lists:

Eventually Mark was offered a place at another school they were happy with, "One week he was number five on the list, and the next he'd got in."

Pay or pray

What else can you do if you want your child to get into a good school? Just hope and pray for the best? Well yes, praying might actually help. One parent told me of her recently acquired interest in church-going: 'The local comp frightens the life out of me,' says Fay who lives in West London. 'So it's literally pay or pray. We can't afford private school.' So Fay has been attending the local church once a week for the past year with her children who are six and ten, (Dad refuses to go) and hopes this will give them a leg up the ladder when they apply to the church secondary school nearby.

One family I heard of even moved their child into a Catholic primary school (losing a term's private fees) as they were told he wouldn't get into a Catholic state secondary school otherwise.

Working the system

Quite apart from ringing the schools directly, years of tutoring, cramming for tests, or even finding a new interest in religion (all of which would appear to get results), some parents go even further. Literally. Even though there are no set catchment areas, it's clear that the nearer you live to a school, the more likely you are to get in.

One admissions officer I spoke to, for an extremely popular South London state secondary school, told me they are well aware that parents move their families near to their chosen school. It might seem dramatic, but if you've got the will and the means to move closer, it's an option, and I have heard of at least two families who have done just that. Of course, schools reserve the right to ask for proof that families are actually living where they say they are at the time of application.

Jane, whose family moved out of London - partly to find a good secondary school - found that their preferred local school was over-subscribed. "We decided to use the fact that Piers has a specific learning difficulty with literacy, as grounds for appeal." They paid for an assessment by an educational psychologist and with the help of his report, won the appeal. Most state schools will admit children living nearby with clearly identified Special Educational Needs.

Securing a job at your school of choice might also help. One mum worked as a school nurse at an independent school and her daughter was subsequently accepted.

- Plan ahead and visit lots of schools in order to make an informed choice.
- You can include up to six state schools. Put a minimum of four on your form which can be in your borough or any where else. (This does not include City Technology colleges or independent schools).
- List schools in order of preference and try to include at least one near your home.

WIN!

To win a hardback copy of John Farrell's *May Contain Nuts*, send us an email or postcard with your story of the lengths you have gone to to get your child into something (not necessarily school). Best one wins! See magazine contact details on page 4.



'I'm sure it didn't hurt that I used to work there,' she said.

Or how about taking up an instrument? Another mum I spoke to was advised to start her son on a musical instrument to give him more chance of getting into Haberdashers Ask, a desirable secondary school in New Cross.

If you are about to embark on this whole process, I highly recommend reading John O'Farrell's brilliantly funny novel, set, incidentally, in southwest London, *May Contain Nuts*. Not many parents would go to the extremes described in the book - but it's not far off.

CHECKLIST

- Don't take no for an answer, ring around and find out where your child is on a waiting list.
- Remember, most children are happy at the school in which they end up.

For more information go to www.wandsworth.gov.uk

Look out for the *Choose a Wandsworth School Brochure* for admissions in September 2007.

