

SCHOOLS/ EDUCATION

Choosing a school

No doubt one of the most important decisions you will make in your child's education will be choosing a primary or secondary school. Making the right choice for you and your child will involve a lot of research and planning.

Admissions and applications

Although school admissions are similar across the whole country, one thing is for sure: you must plan ahead. Make sure to note when and how to apply for a school place. In particular, pay attention to the following points:

1. Time your application

You will usually need to apply for a primary school place well before your child reaches the age of five. Many schools have started to admit 4-year-olds.

You will usually need to apply for a secondary school place before Christmas. This should be done in the year before your child is due to start at secondary school.

2. Find out who handles admissions

Admissions are handled either by the local authority, or by the school itself. If you have not applied, do not assume your child will get a place at the school you want. This is true even if your child is at a nursery, which is linked to an infant school, or at an infant school which is linked to a junior school. Be clear on which way your school deals with admissions:

School admissions handled by the school

If the school of your choice deals with its own admissions, (sometimes referred as "its own **admission authority**") you may have to apply directly to the school.

School admissions handled by the Local Education Authority

If you want your child to go to a school where the **Local Education Authority (LEA)** has responsibility, you **MUST** fill in a LEA admissions form, stating your preferred school. This is true even if it is your second-choice school.

Remember: If you do not fill in an LEA admissions form, your child may not be allocated a school place until all those who did state a preference have been offered a place. It is then possible that your local school will be too full to take your child.

Some LEAs co-ordinate admissions for all schools in their area

This simplifies the admissions process, as you only need to complete a single common application form, issued by the LEA, which allows you to apply for a place at any school in the area. The LEA will then pass on your application to any school that is its own admission authority so that they can decide if your child should be offered a place, based on their published admission arrangements. Your LEA will be able to advise you on whether a co-ordinated admissions scheme operates in your area and whether you need to apply directly to particular schools.

What is the 'admission authority'?

A school's admission authority is the group who deal with your child's school application. They are responsible for sending you the information you need regarding admissions, and they make sure you receive an application form. In areas where the LEA co-ordinates admissions for all state schools, applications can be made on the same application form.

The admission authority can be:

The governing body for foundation and voluntary-aided schools; or

The Local Education Authority (LEA) for community and voluntary- controlled schools.

It is important to read the admission authority's instructions carefully before sending the application.

Most admission authorities set a deadline for receiving applications, so you will need to send your form back to the correct address in good time. Make sure to find out whether you are expected to provide any extra information to support your application. For instance:

If you are applying to a voluntary-aided church school, you may need a letter from your parish priest or minister. Boarding schools are permitted to interview to assess suitability for a boarding place. Denominational schools are also currently permitted to interview, to assess religious/denominational commitment, but following changes in the law must cease to do so for school intakes from September 2005.

If you are applying to a non-comprehensive school, your child may have to sit an entrance test.

Finding the Right School

The most important thing you can do before choosing a school for your child is to do your research. Find as much information as possible about the school you are interested in. You can start your research by doing the following:

1. Visit the school

One of the best ways to assess a school is by visiting it in person. This way, you will gain first-hand knowledge of where your child will be spending their day. You can learn a lot from touring the school by observing the children, the teachers and the way they work together.

Things to consider:

Consider the location of the school. Is it nearby? Will you have to drive or take public transport? When your child is older, can they safely walk to school? Remember, long travel to school is tiring for your child, and it may be difficult to arrange.

Observe the children's work and check the school's resources. Does it appear to be a happy school where everyone is serious about learning?

Find out how the school involves parents

Was the school welcoming? Would it suit your child?

Many schools hold open days and evenings, where you can meet the staff and view children's work. Remember, you could also make an appointment to visit the school and ask to speak with the Head teacher. Schools also have Parents Teacher Associations (PTAs). These associations may be able to give you extra information about the school and offer advice on the admissions process.

2. Obtain the LEA booklets

Your local education authority (LEA) produces a booklet which lists all the schools in your area. This booklet will also contain information:

About the schools

How many pupils they admit

What the admission arrangements are

How popular they are

Where to find more information

3. Obtain the school prospectus

Each year, every school publishes a brochure, called a prospectus. The prospectus will usually tell you more about a particular school than the LEA booklet can, and contains the school's admissions policy in detail. You can obtain a copy of the prospectus from the school. It is an important document, so be sure to receive the booklets from all the schools you might be interested in.

4. Check the performance tables

Every year the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) publishes performance tables for

primary and secondary schools. Though they cannot give a complete picture of a school, performance tables provide a guide to how well a school or college is doing.

Find out more information about performance tables._

5. Research Ofsted reports

It is also helpful to read the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reports, which are produced by the government's school inspectors. A report is available for every school in the country. To view a report about a particular school, performance tables and see individual school's websites, go to Ofsted.

Do remember:

Schools can change quite quickly

Past experience isn't always a good guide to the future

Other children may not be like yours

School choice: your rights

Your child has the right to a place in school while they are between the ages of 5-16.

You have the right to say which school you would prefer your child to attend, regardless of the school's location. **But your right to express a preference does not guarantee you a place at the school if it is oversubscribed.**

By law, your local education authority (LEA) must offer your child a school place.

If your child is not offered a place at your preferred school, you have the right to appeal to an independent panel.

Remember, you must first apply to a school. Even if your child is at a nursery linked to an infant school, or an infant school linked to a junior school, you will still need to make an application to move them on to the next stage. You must not assume your child will automatically get a place at a school.

Useful Websites

www.ofsted.gov.uk

www.parentcentre.gov.uk

www.dcsf.gov.uk

www.learning.wales.gov.uk

www.ltscotland.org.uk

www.wales.gov.uk