

Open Evenings

Even if you have your mind made up and have chosen your school already, it is still worth attending your local school open evenings. If nothing else, the observations you make will ratify your decision and give you peace of mind, safe in the knowledge that you have made the right decision. However the comparisons you make may also highlight shortcomings in your school of choice. In short - go along to your local open evenings or open days.

The evening will be divided into two parts: your tour and the Head teacher's/Principal's talk.

The Tour

Most often schools will provide student guides to show you around. If there are no guides this will not necessarily be a negative point for the school, it may simply mean that the school is well signposted and it doesn't feel there is a need for guides. However it may also mean that they have not organised any and/or don't trust the students to talk positively about the school. If you find there are no guides, then talk to as many different students as you can during the evening.

You can of course choose not to go on a guided tour and explore the school yourselves. However, resist the urge to be independent at first, you can do this later in the evening. It is always worth joining a tour initially as you will pick up a lot from the guides. It will also ease your own child's anxieties, as they get to know the guide and come to realise that not all secondary students exist only to make the lives of Year 7 students a misery.

Try to go on a tour that has few parents. You can do this by allowing one tour to set off and then joining the next one, which will hopefully have less people. You can also have a look around the school without a guide at first, attend the talk and then go back for a guide. Things will be quieter later on. It is also worth trying to go on a tour with a younger guide in Year 7 or 8. They will be more forthcoming with information and set your own child's mind to rest (hopefully!) when they hear about the experiences they had when starting at the school.

Questions to ask your guide

Find out as much as you can about the school from your guide. They will try to be positive, as students are on the whole loyal to their school, however you will be able to read between the lines. Having said this, it is not about tripping the student up and only looking for the negatives, it is also to give them the opportunity to highlight the positives, in order to comfort your child and set your mind at rest. Below are a selection of questions you might ask your guide and if possible any other students you meet on the way round (The more students you ask, the clearer the picture you will begin to

develop), some may be obvious, but do ask them as they will encourage the guide to talk and be more forthcoming.

Topic	Questions	What you hope to find out
Quality of Teaching & Learning	What are your favourite subjects? Why?	The icebreaker questions. The more students you ask on your way round, the more you'll gain a clearer picture of where it's going well and not so well.
	What are your least favourite? Why?	
	Describe what you think a good teacher is. Do you have many teachers like this in the school?	The extent to which the students is experiencing and so recognises good practice e.g. supportive, clear explanations, challenging, fair etc. Again the more students you ask, the clearer your picture will be
	When do you think a teacher isn't so good? Does this happen often?	
	When was the last time your books were marked in {pick a subject}?	Teachers won't mark every week, but you want an answer that sounds as if there is regular marking
	Do you know what level or predicted grade you are on in {pick subject}?	Students should be able to answer these questions with confidence
	Do you know what you have to do to reach the next level?	
	What do teachers do when you are stuck?	Do teachers encourage independence and/or challenge the student or do they just give the answer?
Curriculum Offer	Do you have a good choice of subjects at GCSE level? (if Year 9, 10 or 11)	What is the breadth of subjects on offer? To what extent are students advised or guided towards certain subjects? To what extent is there a free choice?
	Do you have a good choice of subjects at Post 16 level? (if Year 11, 12 or 13)	
	What else would you like to see on the curriculum?	What is missing on the curriculum?
	What do you do after school? Are there many clubs?	Is there a range of extra-curricular activities? Are students encouraged to take part? How popular are the activities?
	Can you do your homework in school?	Is there provision for after school independent study?
	What do you hope to do when you leave school?	How good is the careers advice and guidance?
Pastoral, Behaviour & Ethos	Where do you go if you are upset or worried about something?	Does the student know and understand the pastoral procedures?
	How happy do you think the students at this school are? Give me a score out of 5 for happiness	This answer will vary according to the student's own experiences.
	Is there anywhere in the school you avoid at break or lunch times?	Are there places that are 'no-go zones' for some students

	Is there a separate area for Year 7s to go to if they wish at break and lunch?	Quite often schools will provide a separate space for Year 7s only. They can opt to use this space or not.
	Are you happy with the way the school deals with any misbehaviour?	Things should be dealt with quickly and students should be aware of possible consequences to misdemeanors.
	What do you do in tutor time?	Is there a tutorial programme?
	Does all your teachers know your name? Does the Head and other senior staff know your name?	How welcoming, personal and friendly is the school? Do staff take the time to get to know you?
	How does your opinion get heard?	Hopefully the student will mention a student council and/or class reps, or year reps

What to look for on the tour

During the tour you should be taken to all the subject areas. If not then ask to be taken there. It is important to visit all the subjects as this will give your child a chance to see how different and exciting secondary school is. It will be daunting for your child, but hopefully your guide and other students will explain how you quickly become used to the size. Prompt them to do this if they aren't forthcoming.

It is normal for subjects to have student helpers and can be telling if they don't. Ask them why they don't have helpers, there may be a good reason. Do encourage your child to talk to these helpers and if the opportunity arises, ask them some of the questions above.

There should also be exercise books out for you to look at. If so look at the marking. Are the books marked regularly? Does the marking tell the student next steps and/or what they need to do to improve further?

Talk to the teachers, it's good to find out what morale is like. Are they genuinely positive about the school? Here are some possible questions:

Questions	What you hope to find out
How long have you been here?	It doesn't really matter about the answer as there are so many different reasons to explain a person's length of service. However by the end of the evening you will have a clear picture as to how stable the staffing is
What staff development opportunities do you have here?	Hopefully you will hear positive, confident answers that are consistent across the school
How do you manage behaviour?	
How often do you set homework?	

How does your department's results compare to the rest of the school/nationally	They ought to know the answer to these. Especially if it is the Head of Department
How big are your classes?	This will give you an idea as to how well resourced the school is. You would expect smaller classes at KS4 and 5 especially in KS4 option subjects
How many lessons do you teach per week?	Again this will show how well resourced the school is. The ratio for a normal classroom teacher should not be above 90% contact time. Between 80% and 90% is about right.
Does your subject set? If they do, what criteria do they use to set? How easy is it for a student to move between sets?	You want to hear a sound rationale for their setting and confident consistent answers across the school
For optional subjects: How many students choose your subject in Year 10 & 11? How many choose it at A Level?	You want to find out how popular the subject is. Numbers can vary each year and some subjects are naturally more popular than others. However if your child has a definite talent for a subject, then you will want it to be a popular and successful course.

As you walk around look at the following:

- Displays - There ought to be good examples of student work around the school and especially in the classrooms. Bare in mind that if the Open Evening is held in November or October some of the work may be from last year.
- One point to consider is the nature of the work on display - is it all final, completed pieces of work or are there examples of draft work alongside final copies. This says a lot about the value the school puts on the learning process to achieving the end result, rather than only valuing the finished article.
- Is there graffiti on walls? There is no excuse for this. Graffiti does happen in schools, but if it is removed straight away the issue will be minimal as the students realise that the school as a whole takes pride in its appearance
- Check the toilets. Are they in good condition is their any graffiti - again there is no excuse for graffiti and you would expect the toilets to be maintained in good condition. If not then it may indicate that the school can't keep up with the level of damage or vandalism. In all my years teaching I have come across very little deliberate damage in schools where there was a conscious effort by all staff to take pride in their environment.
- What is the quality of equipment like especially in Music, PE, Technology and Science (see subject specific questions and observations below)? Has the equipment (especially in Music) been well looked after?
- Don't be put off by a lack of computer rooms. The school may use laptops or pads as alternatives. They may also allow students to use their own devices.

Check this out **See Information Communication Technology (ICT) resources**

- Are the information signs for students around the school written in a positive tone or are they couched in negative terms? E.g. Don't . . . ; Never . . . ; No . .
- Is the library in good condition and well stocked?
- Are the outside spaces also well maintained and free of graffiti?
- Are there many areas out of bounds on the evening? There are probably good reasons for this e.g. Staffing on the evening. However, if you are not able to see the whole school, then you ought to come back for a day visit and ask to see those areas.

Subject specific questions and observations

These are additional questions you may want to ask if you or your child have interests in specific areas:

Languages

- How many languages are on offer?
- Will my child be able to sample more than one?
- If not, how much say will I and my child have in what language they learn?
- Do you have an 'Assistant' most schools will have a foreign assistant? If not it may show the school's lack of commitment to languages
- Does the department run foreign trips? This is one indicator to show the commitment of the department. If they don't, do ask why not - it may be that it is a small department and they have unavoidable personal/family commitments elsewhere.

Music/Drama/Dance

- Are there peripatetic lessons?
- What shows do you put on each year?
- Is there an orchestra or specific bands?

Information & Communication Technology (ICT)

- Are there opportunities to learn code?
- What is the ratio of devices to students
- Do you have a purchase scheme to buy a laptop or pad for my child?

PE

- What teams do you run?
- How do you ensure maximum participation by all?

Technology

- What subjects do year 7s cover in Technology?

- At what stage can students specialise in a specific subject e.g. Graphics, Resistant Materials, Food?

The Headteacher's Talk

Normally at some point in the evening (once or several times) the Headteacher will give a talk. It is important you attend the talk as there will be some important information given out such as admission dates and it will also give you the opportunity to find out about the vision and future plans for the school. In addition the Head of a school sets the tone for the ethos of that school and so listening to the Head will give you a real insight to how formal, friendly, strict the establishment is.

During talk, make a mental note of the following to help you decide if the ethos is right for you:

- Does the Head use a lot of jargon that alienates you or others around you? The head ought to use vocabulary that everyone understands. Using educational terms that are specific to the profession, can show a disregard for the needs of parents
- How often does the Head talk about the range of student; successes and achievements e.g. Performances or sporting achievements, rather than just focusing on the ones that are measured by the government (e.g. GCSE results)? The Head ought to recognise the wide range of talents and abilities the students in his or her school has.
- Does the Head recognise that there are areas for improvement and outlines what they are doing about it? No school is perfect and a bit of humble pie, shows that the Head respects your intelligence.
- Are there children used as part of the talk to describe the school? If so is it totally rehearsed or is there an allowance for spontaneity. If students are given the opportunity to talk freely about the school and answer questions then it shows that the school is confident in what it does.
- If students are used does the Head refer to the students by name?
- To what extent does the Head refer to the prospective students in the Audience? The head ought to be putting the everyone's mind at rest with regards to the school, not just the parents.
- What is your overall impression? Formal or informal? Warm and friendly or cold and distant? Genuine or a well rehearsed political speech!?

Before you leave . . .

Make sure you have picked up a copy of the school prospectus and any other literature the school makes available.

Independent Visits

For those cynics amongst you (and rest assured I'm one of them), who don't think they are seeing the real school on an Open Day and want a more realistic picture, you can always ring the school and ask for a tour. Most schools will accommodate this, especially if you give a good excuse as to why you weren't able to make the open events. You can of course be honest and say you want a final look before you make your decision.

If you time the tour right, you might also be able to watch a change-over of lessons and perhaps break-time taking place. This will give you a real taste of the school ethos. In addition to the things to look out for on an open evening, here are a few specific things to look out for during the day:

- Do students walk purposefully to their lessons or are there lots of stragglers
- Are staff visible and supervising at breaks and change-over of lessons
- Is there excessive noise not related to learning activities?
- Are queues orderly (e.g. for break-time snacks or lunch)
- Are staff at their doors to greet students at the beginning of lessons

While there are huge advantages to visiting a school during the day there are also some possible disadvantages. For example, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of judging a school based on one lesson you view or one incident you witness. A school of 900 11 – 16 year olds will have at least 30 lessons taking place at anyone time. If you do witness a scuffle or another aggressive incident, don't worry so much about the incident (there after all 900 hormonally charged young people wandering around at break-times in a relatively small area), be more concerned with regards to how the school deals with it. Are there staff around to nip things in the bud at break and lunchtime? Do staff wade in all guns blazing or is there a calm measured approach, appropriate to the incident?

Another possible pitfall of day visits to look out for is the possibility that your child may feel intimidated by the crowds of gigantic students milling around. While open evenings are inviting, friendly and exciting, visits during the day are a different matter from your child's perspective. No matter how welcoming and safe the ethos is to you, it will seem a big and daunting place to your child. Hopefully your guide will put your child at ease and reassure him or her. If you feel it will help, if your child already know a student in the school it may worth asking if it is possible for this student to accompany you on the tour.

All the best in finding the best school for your child. Hopefully it will be us!!

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