

# The Lady

Independent Schools Guide  
September 2012

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## INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS SPECIAL

*As the new school year begins, follow our indispensable guide to safeguarding your child's future*



## Choosing the right school for your child

*It's the most important decision you will ever make on behalf of your child. But don't fret – Vanessa Berridge is here to help*

All educationalists emphasise that it is crucial to know your children, and not impose upon them your own ambitions and hopes. It may be difficult to assess a small child's academic potential at three or four, which is why it's necessary to keep an open mind throughout. But there are questions that you should be asking yourself as you begin the process

of school selection. You need to observe how well your child relates to other children, and whether he or she is shy and retiring, needing nurturing in a smaller, more caring and less challenging school. You also need to think about how the child tends to learn, whether he or she is more visual than verbal, more adept with figures than with words. Does the child have special talents, such as ▷

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*'It's a myth that it's necessary to put your child's name down at birth for schools like Eton'*

painting, music, ballet or sport?

Relatively few pre-prep and prep schools have competitive entrance tests, apart from in the larger population centres, such as London, where the pressure on places is greatest. Even if there are tests at five and seven, you shouldn't think of these as exams that children pass or fail, but as assessments as to the right kind of school for your child.

#### STARTING OUT

It's a myth that it's necessary to put your child's name down at birth for schools like Eton. In fact, Barnaby Lenon, chairman of the Independent Schools Council (ISC), and formerly headmaster of Harrow, stopped that system when he was in charge of admissions at Eton in the mid-1990s. 'You don't have to decide at an early age,' he says. 'Most senior schools now pre-select at 11, so that your child isn't entered for a school which is inappropriate at 13.'

Choosing a school is a series of sieves. Do you want boarding or day? If boarding, weekly or full-time? Co-ed or single sex? Faith or non-faith? Do you want a school that takes your child from five or seven through to 18, or do you want your daughter to make the change at 11, or your son at 13? If boarding is a possibility, you should

consider what it will give your child that a day school cannot. And if you're thinking of full boarding, you need to find out how many pupils stay over the weekend and whether there's a good range of opportunities laid on.

Even when choosing a first school, these questions should be kept in mind, although you may want to consider moving a child later on if, say, an academically selective school proves too demanding or vice versa. Location matters, too. If you're opting for a day school, it's best if it's no more than 20 minutes away, so that the children don't have tiring journeys and have their friends at hand, believes Lenon. 'I despair of parents who send their children some distance when there is a good school nearer.'

#### MAKING THE CHOICE

All these considerations will help to narrow down your choice. If you are relocating - from abroad or within the UK - it may be worth employing an educational consultant such as Gabbitas. 'You can learn a certain amount from school-gate chat,' says Catherine Walters, director of schools placement at Gabbitas, 'but we're professionals. We keep up to date about what is happening where, and we have knowledge of the nuances within schools that can make all

#### DOS AND DON'TS WHEN VISITING A SCHOOL

##### DO...

- ◆ Prepare carefully the questions you want to ask.
- ◆ Try to chat with both pupils and teachers independently. A pupil-led tour is often very instructive.
- ◆ Try to observe a lesson, but also look at the children out of lessons to see how the school works.
- ◆ Look at the attitude of the children. Do they relate well to their teachers? Do they look confident and happy? Is there a buzz in the classrooms you visit?
- ◆ Spend some time with the school's head and, if you're looking at a boarding school, then ask to meet the house parents.
- ◆ Find out about how the school communicates with parents. Is there a lively parent-teacher association?
- ◆ Ask about pastoral care and about whether there are school counsellors to help with emotional problems.
- ◆ Ask about policies on drugs, alcohol and bullying. Beware if the answers sound fudged.
- ◆ Look at the noticeboards. If the school advertises a wide range of extra-curricular activities, make sure that they really are on offer, and in depth - not just to a handful of children in the first team. Are there photographs of matches, concerts, plays and flyers for other events?

##### DON'T...

- ◆ Forget to ask about the flexibility of the curriculum, and whether there is a chance for children to study more unusual subjects.
- ◆ Use league tables as your chief yardstick: they're a guide, but nothing more.
- ◆ Be dazzled by a whistle-stop tour by the head, which shows off the school but doesn't allow you to meet pupils or teachers.
- ◆ Be seduced by splendid facilities if you're not impressed by the staff. Teachers are an even more important resource.
- ◆ Just look at the public areas. Try to get behind the scenes to the common rooms, cloakrooms and loos.
- ◆ Go against your better judgement. If you have any reservations about the school, don't pick it for your child.



*'Visit two or three schools – can you imagine your child being there, valued and thriving?'*

the difference between happiness and misery for a child.'

In the early days, it's probably best to choose a nearby school with a kindly ethos, where children can flourish without too much pressure, even if you believe that your child is likely to be an academic high-flyer. A child who has learned to enjoy school and education is likely to be less intimidated when moving on, than one who has been pushed beyond his or her abilities while still small.

Most parents register for several schools and make the decision late in the day, says Lenon. It is also vital, he says, to listen to the school head, who will be familiar not only with your child but with the schools you are considering. 'Prep schools don't like their pupils to fail Common Entrance.'

Keith Crombie, headmaster of St Michael's pre-prep and prep school in Kent, agrees. 'A big part of my job,' he says, 'is to advise parents on the next stage. We liaise with senior schools and can play a part to help, if

a child is likely to be shy at interview, for instance. If the parents' aspirations are not realistic, it is my job to tell them. We take pride in getting our children to schools where they will flourish.'

Having drawn up a shortlist of schools, you need to look carefully at their prospectuses and websites. If either is unimpressive, the chances are the school is, too. Don't be over-influenced by league tables, but look at the schools' valued-added measures, which are often published.

If Winchester, Eton, St Paul's or Westminster is your first choice, you'll need a good second choice, advises Lenon. 'But the applicant-to-place ratio is probably not as frightening as it looks,' he adds. 'At Harrow, we typically had 500 applicants for 150 places, but we never knew how many other schools the pupils were down for.'

You should also contact parents at the school, who will be able to give a detailed account of their experiences. And, most importantly – visit the schools. Crombie suggests seeing two

or three, and asking yourself whether you can see your child in any of them. 'That's actually more important than whether the school is single sex or co-ed,' he says. 'Can you imagine your child being there, valued and thriving?'

Crombie also stresses the importance of having a personal tour of the school. 'Don't just visit on a formal open day, when a special show is being put on. You need to see whether there's a buzz about the school and good interaction between the children and the staff. As a head, I most dread showing parents round during a wet break, but then they really see how the school works.'

Although it's worth taking your child to visit one or two schools, the choice must be down to the parents. 'I don't see how a 10- or 11-year-old is in a position to choose,' says Lenon. 'A child that age will be influenced by something peripheral. It's the parents' responsibility to know their child, take advice from the prep school head and choose the appropriate school.'

**USEFUL CONTACTS**

**Boarding Schools' Association**  
020-7798 1580, [www.boarding.org.uk](http://www.boarding.org.uk)  
**Gabbitas** 020-7734 0161,  
[www.gabbitas.co.uk](http://www.gabbitas.co.uk)  
**Girls' Day School Trust** 020-7393  
6666, [www.gdst.net](http://www.gdst.net)  
**Girls' Schools Association** 0116-254  
1619, [www.gsa.uk.com](http://www.gsa.uk.com)  
**The Good Schools Guide** 020-3286  
6824, [www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk](http://www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk)  
**Independent Association of Prep  
Schools** 01926-887833, [www.iaps.org.uk](http://www.iaps.org.uk)  
**Independent Schools Council**  
020-7766 7070, [www.isc.co.uk](http://www.isc.co.uk)

**SCHOOLS**

**Charterhouse, Surrey** 01483-291500, [www.charterhouse.org.uk](http://www.charterhouse.org.uk)  
**Downe House, Berkshire** 01635-200286, [downehouse.net](http://downehouse.net)  
**Eton College, Berkshire** 01753-671000, [etoncollege.com](http://etoncollege.com)  
**Harrow School, Middlesex** 020-8872 8000, [www.harrowschool.org.uk](http://www.harrowschool.org.uk)  
**King's College School, Wimbledon** 020-8255 5300, [www.kcs.org.uk](http://www.kcs.org.uk)  
**Marlborough College, Wiltshire** 01672-892200, [www.marlboroughcollege.org](http://www.marlboroughcollege.org)  
**Portsmouth High School, Hampshire** 023-9282 6714, [www.portsmouthhigh.co.uk](http://www.portsmouthhigh.co.uk)  
**St Michael's, Kent** 01959-522137, [www.stmichaels.kent.sch.uk](http://www.stmichaels.kent.sch.uk)  
**Uppingham, Rutland** 01572-822216, [www.uppingham.co.uk](http://www.uppingham.co.uk)  
**Wellington College, Berkshire** 01344-444000, [www.wellingtoncollege.org.uk](http://www.wellingtoncollege.org.uk)  
**Whitgift, South Croydon** 020-8688 9222, [www.whitgift.co.uk](http://www.whitgift.co.uk)  
**Winchester College, Hampshire** 01962-621100, [www.winchestercollege.org](http://www.winchestercollege.org)

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E: [registrar@heathfieldschool.net](mailto:registrar@heathfieldschool.net) [www.heathfieldschool.net](http://www.heathfieldschool.net)

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Swanbourne House School, Buckinghamshire, MK17 0HZ

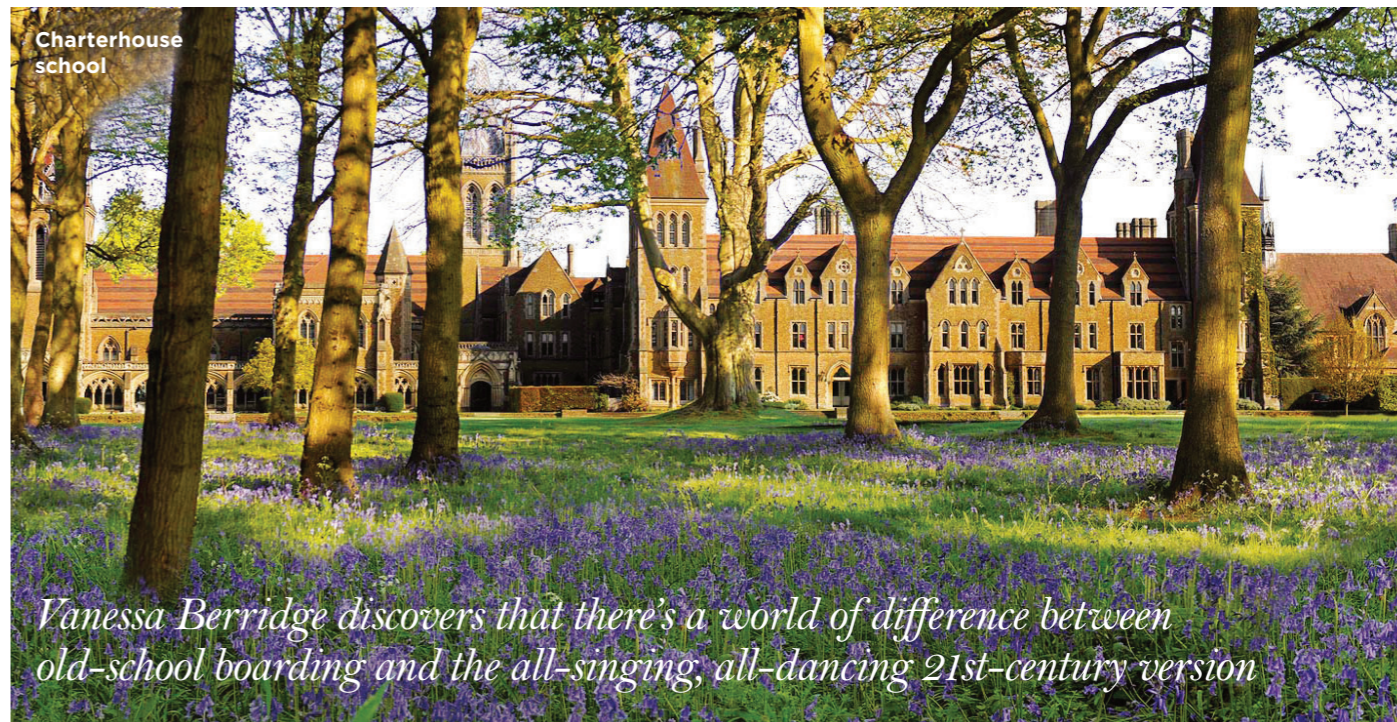
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Charterhouse school

*Vanessa Berridge discovers that there's a world of difference between old-school boarding and the all-singing, all-dancing 21st-century version*

# FEELING AT HOME AT SCHOOL

The last few years have seen a halt in the steep decline of boarding that took place in the three decades from 1960. Day schools still tend to be favoured by the majority of parents, as the latest figures from the 2012 Independent Schools Council (ISC) census indicate: boarders represent 13.5 per cent, so 68,476 out of 508,472 pupils at the ISC's 1,223 member schools. The majority of schools with boarding have over 75 per cent day pupils. There are regional variations, too, with 27.9 per cent of all pupils in the southwest boarding, but only 2.2 per cent in Greater London, where the choice of independent day schools is more extensive.

The boarding sector is buoyant at the moment, particularly with the internationalisation of UK schools. 'We live in a global economy and schools reflect that,' says Richard Harman, headmaster of Uppingham, and current chairman of the Boarding Schools Association (BSA). He points to an increasing number of pupils from China, Hong Kong, Russia and elsewhere in Europe, shown by ISC research.

And schools that have traditionally been day schools are now opening boarding houses, such as Whitgift in Croydon. 'Their weekend programme

is all-singing, all-dancing,' observes Ian Hunt, managing director of educational consultants Gabbitas. 'It is clear that if the school is going to offer boarding, it's going to do it wholeheartedly.'

For boarding has changed over the last 20 years, and even more rapidly in the last five to 10 years, says Hilary Moriarty, National Director of Boarding at the Boarding Schools' Association.

'Schools have become much more open and accessible. They were once self-contained and impenetrable

Skype, Facebook and email (although most schools restrict use to certain periods of the day). Schools no longer keep parents at arm's length. Although Uppingham is a full boarding school, with only one fixed exeat, plus half-term, parents are welcomed, even midweek, to matches, plays and concerts. Crucially, most parents now live no more than an hour and a half from their children's schools.

This accessibility has transformed the concept of boarding, and has been in response to parents' requirements.

*'Schools that have traditionally been day schools are now opening boarding houses'*

worlds.' She cites the example of an 11-year-old boy who went away for the first time to school some decades ago during a postal strike. 'Pupils at the school weren't allowed to phone for the first three weeks because it was thought they needed to settle in,' she recounts. 'But they weren't getting letters, either, and the school wouldn't bend the rules, so he had no contact with his parents at the start.'

That kind of inflexibility is unthinkable today. Children can keep in touch daily with their parents by

The last 20 years have seen a major investment in the quality of boarding, both in terms of facilities and of staff. 'Boarding accommodation is much less spartan. There's a sense that schools needs to be a home from home,' says Harman. The training of boarding staff has also become more professional. 'We've tried to retain the enthusiasm of the amateur,' he explains. 'We still want the old-fashioned sort of teacher with a vocation, who loved being part of a community and was happy to work >



Sport at Uppingham

24-7 during term time. But we need to underpin that with rigorous training in the issues that children face.' Most schools, too, have professionally trained counsellors to help with delicate emotional issues, while the role of the house parent is crucial. These improvements have been driven both by the BSA and by a rigorous inspection process since 2002, when national minimum standards for boarding schools were set.

'Parents can be reassured,' says Harman, 'that they are paying for good-quality care, underpinned by a sound regulatory system.'

So it's no longer a case of handing over a mite at seven and getting him back at 18 a fully-formed adult. Now,

boarding is about a partnership between parents and school. Hunt, formerly headmaster of Millfield, says that schools do not attempt to be surrogates, but fully involve parents. 'It's a joint approach, a triangle between parents, school and child. Communication is key.' He also adds that schools can even enhance parents' relationships with their children by dealing with the difficult disciplinary battles in teenage years.

In cases of bereavement or marriage breakdown, boarding school may even offer the stability and continuity not provided at home. Modern work patterns and economic pressure are also changing the nature of uptake of boarding places. Many

Spending time at close quarters also means that children make friends for life. That's the view of Roland Bardsley, whose 15-year-old daughter, Leilia, is a pupil at Uppingham. 'There's something magical about the confidence that a boarding school gives you,' he believes. 'You have to go through so much on your own, and that kind of adversity defines a person.' He and his wife chose Uppingham because it's 'a comforting, kind place, which cossets and looks after the children'. His daughter has grown in self-confidence since she's been there, and is happy with full boarding. 'Leilia is convinced that the best times are at weekends. She likes the total immersion in her own set.'

At Uppingham, the pupils are progressively given more freedom within a structured environment. In the sixth form, they are allowed to go out into the local town, have more use of their laptops, and have their own rooms (many now with en-suite showers). There's a sixth-form centre and vibrant social life at weekends. For the reality is that teenagers would rather spend time with their peers. 'In the sixth form, they're so busy, they don't want to go home,' says Harman.

Making the transition from day to boarding for the sixth form bridges the gap between day school and university, believes Noelle Chase, whose younger daughter has just left Marlborough. 'I'm not worried about her moving on to higher education now,' she says. In the end, it was her daughters' choice to leave their London day school. 'I think they liked the opportunity to reinvent themselves. And my elder daughter got the chance to play sports at Charterhouse.'

And, if you're worrying about the expense, the difference between boarding and day schools may be less great than imagined, as Hunt points out: 'When you factor in the cost of petrol, extra-curricular activities, food and parents' time, boarding can be economically worthwhile.'

parents now both work full time in demanding jobs, so weekly boarding makes sense, leaving weekends free to be enjoyed together.

'The good thing is that there is now a choice for parents,' says Harman. 'But this has to be carefully managed. Weekly boarding needs to be a genuine educational offer, but not just a glorified sleepover.' He believes that the very busy and varied programme of schooling and extra-curricular activities offered at Uppingham can only be achieved by full boarding.

It's hard to provide that kind of packed programme in a day school, which is why Noelle Chase chose to move her two daughters to Charterhouse and Marlborough in the sixth form. 'It was the facilities that attracted us,' she tells me, 'and the extra commitment of the staff in a boarding school.'

Advocates for boarding are in no doubt that the extra sport, music and drama on tap in a boarding school, combined with constant access to teachers, is of huge educational and developmental benefit to any child.

*'Weekly boarding needs to be a genuine educational offer, not just a glorified sleepover'*



Uppingham school

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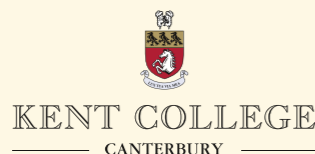


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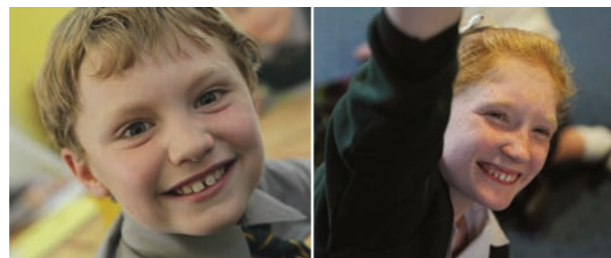


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Stratton-on-the-Fosse Radstock Bath BA3 4RJ

[www.downside.co.uk](http://www.downside.co.uk)



Vanessa Berridge reveals  
how to prepare children  
for the entrance exam to  
the school of your choice

# Making a good entrance

Childhood has always been about jumping hurdles, but it does seem that the hurdles are multiplying earlier and getting higher. The first hurdle, which obsesses many parents from birth, is how to get their child into a school of their choice. I remember ringing up a pre-prep, slightly tongue in cheek, when my first son was three weeks old, only to be told that I had left it rather late. So, when my second son was due, I rang before he was even born. He was due in August, so the lists for his year were already closed: the school secretary advised me to delay his birth until September (not something I fancied, nor, in the event, did he).

This snapshot gives an idea of how competitive London schools are. And, if it's tough at three, you can imagine how much the pressure hots up as the hurdles of entry at seven, 11 and 13 approach, especially for places in the most academically selective schools.

Not surprisingly, all this feeds parental paranoia, with many parents opting to have their children coached from a surprisingly young age. But the clear message from educational professionals is - don't. 'Children shouldn't be coached at all,' says Jane Prescott, headmistress of Portsmouth High School. 'Coaching may help give a false impression of the child's ability, which will lead to problems later on.'

Ian Hunt, managing director of educational consultants Gabbitas, agrees. 'Extreme preparation for an entrance exam will skew the test,' he suggests. 'Children may well cope with the coached aspect of the exam, but flounder in the classroom where different skills are needed. If you prepare children for a school that is

above their academic ability, they won't be happy there.'

It can, of course, be hard to hold your nerve when you discover that virtually every other child seems to be having coaching. But, says Prescott, 'Parents need to steel themselves not to be influenced by other parents' anxieties.' Apart from anything else, schools know how to spot hot-housed children. 'We can tell whether a child's problems with a maths or English question is because she hasn't met it before,' says Prescott. 'It's our job to assess natural ability. We also look at the child's previous school to see whether she's likely to have received in-school coaching.'

Entrance tests, says Hunt, should be informing the school about how best they can help the children who are applying - where their strengths and

coach a child coming from a feeder pre-prep or prep school.'

So no child should face an entrance test 'blind'. Parents can get papers from previous years to help children understand what will be expected. 'The papers will also give an idea of how the school makes its assessment,' says Hamlyn. 'For example, does the English comprehension ask for written answers, or is it multiple choice? If your child has problems writing cogently, then it may be an idea to find a school that has multiple choice. Schools should be transparent about their entrance exams, and you should be suspicious if they're not.'

At Portsmouth High School, younger children are encouraged to spend a day at the school to familiarise themselves with the environment. 'If the girls feel relaxed, they are likely to

*'Entrance examinations are an information tool - they're not a question of pass or fail'*

weaknesses are, and how much added value the school can give to assist children to reach their full potential. 'Entrance exams are an information tool, not a question of pass or fail.'

Susan Hamlyn, director of the Good Schools Guide Advice Service, would also argue against coaching for the most part, but there are exceptions. 'It is not the business of state primaries to coach for academically selective schools - so it's disingenuous to say it's not necessary. In that case, a little coaching to give children exam practice, or to give them an idea of the maths syllabus, may well be worthwhile. But it's outrageous to

show themselves at their best.'

Ultimately, Hunt, Prescott and Hamlyn all agree that the important thing is to let children enjoy their childhood and then sit them for the appropriate school - nothing makes up for the investment of parental time.

'It's not down to coaching,' Hunt emphasises. 'What you should be looking at is the range of cultural opportunities that you're giving your child. Are they reading to the highest quality they're capable of at their age?' Hamlyn sums it up: 'On a summer's day,' she says, 'a child should be out with friends and getting into mischief, rather than going to summer schools.'



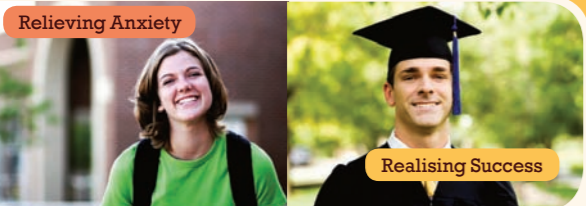
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# TESTING TIMES

*Examination choices can be extremely confusing and recently there has been much experimentation. Vanessa Berridge unravels the options*

**T**he way children are examined is in a state of flux. There are daily horror stories in the newspapers about grade inflation, about how our education and examination system is no longer fit for purpose. So, in recent years, there has been considerable experimentation, most of it at sixth-form level, but many schools are now considering other options for the middle school years.

### THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS

The more rigorous and linear IGCSEs have now been adopted by academically competitive schools, such as Winchester, Eton and some Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) schools, in addition to, or to replace, GCSEs. A minority, such as Wellington, is taking up the broader-based, four-year IB Middle Year Programme (MYP), which leads to the sixth-form IB diploma.

Wellington offers both the MYP and conventional GCSEs (MYP pupils have to take Maths and English GCSE, which is a university requirement). One in three pupils at the school now chooses the MYP, which has no external exams

and is a continuous programme over four years from age 12 to 16. Dr David James, head of exams at Wellington, believes GCSEs are too narrow. 'For example, you can teach part of Macbeth rather than the whole play just to pass the tests,' he says. 'GCSEs are fine for schools with large classes and little teaching time, but that's not the case in most independent schools.'

By contrast, the MYP allows schools to develop their own programmes, and to use different methods of assessment. 'It's more flexible,' says James, 'and enables greater creativity on the part of staff and pupils.'

Michael Gove recently threw a further spanner in the works by suggesting that GCSEs should be replaced by the old O levels and CSEs. This proposal provoked a sharp response from Kevin Stannard, innovation and learning director at the GDST: 'It is a shame that Mr Gove is not prepared to be braver when assessing examinations for 16-year-olds. Getting rid of AS exams for 17-year-olds would have been grasping the nettle. Replacing GCSE with O level is more like replacing one weed

with another. Given that most able pupils are going to carry on with their studies in chosen subjects, why not require them to take exams at 16 only in the core subjects that they propose to drop? That would encourage breadth in learning to 16, while giving students space for deeper learning. That would be truly revolutionary.'

He adds: 'Few other countries follow the model of intensely high stakes earlier than school-leaving age. The rationale is that GCSEs become the way in which you give people the right to specialise, so they have a head start at university here, which is more specialist than in, say, the United States. But, once you start picking at it, you need to look at both fifth-form and sixth-form studies together to achieve an integrated whole.'

His argument is that children are being subjected to three years of intensive, high-stakes work if they follow GCSE with AS and A2. 'AS are helpful for sorting out university applications,' he says. 'But they're not having a great effect on teaching. We're getting pupils in rather than preparing them for university.' ▢





*'It's the subjects offered and the way in which they are taught that matter most'*

**THE SIXTH FORM**

The A\* grade has been introduced at A level in the sixth form, to counteract claims of grade inflation and to differentiate the highest flyers for universities. The relatively new and demanding Cambridge Pre-U (more like A levels of 30 or 40 years ago) is the chosen system of Downe House, Winchester and Charterhouse. The breadth and rigour of the International Baccalaureate (IB) has wider appeal than the Pre-U, in both the state and independent sectors. But the leading UK IB school, King's College School, Wimbledon, messianic in its promotion of the diploma, has sent out shock waves by deciding to run A levels again from September 2013. 'The IB world is very unhappy about that,' says Janette Wallis, senior editor at the Good Schools Guide. 'King's College School's decision is a statement that IB doesn't serve everyone.'

All-girls Downe House took the decision to go over to the full Pre-U diploma two years ago, believing it to be the best preparation for university. 'The grading structure differentiates more keenly at the highest level,' says headmistress Emma McKendrick, who also likes the Global Perspectives and independent research element. The school chose Pre-U in preference to the IB because, in McKendrick's words, 'We believe that the IB is too prescriptive and restrictive to enable us to nurture each individual's talents'.

The school's first full Pre-U cohort has received its results, and McKendrick is delighted with them, as 26 per cent of entries were either graded at the

two highest Distinction levels (D1 or D2), equivalent to A\* in A level. This includes 17 results at the highest available Pre-U grade of D1.

'The staff have enjoyed learning alongside the girls so it's proved a very good qualification for us,' she tells me. 'The girls have appreciated Pre-U's challenge and depth and they've received generous offers from the good spread of universities that we would normally expect.'

Wellington College offers both IB and A levels, although Dr James argues that IB is more testing, especially as 70 per cent of the ultimate grade comes from exams at the end of the second year. 'A-level students who have banked many of their results have an easy year in the upper sixth just before they enter university and the most exacting stage of their education.' He adds that the IB diploma is rigorous and interesting to teach. 'The English questions on IB papers are like university questions, testing the examinees' ability to deal with wider concepts. I don't see any increased rigour in the new A levels.'

Barnaby Lenon, chairman of the Independent Schools Council, believes that A levels are not yet dead. 'The statistics don't support the idea that everyone is moving away from them,' he says. 'IB and Pre-U are excellent diplomas, and it's very good to have an alternative to A levels. But I resist the idea that A levels are easier than they were. The A-level syllabus in most subjects is more interesting, the books are better and the AS has encouraged pupils to work harder in the lower

sixth.' He applauds recent reforms. 'The January modules are likely to cease within the next couple of years at both AS and A2 level, so the grade inflation caused by module resit will no longer apply. A levels are moving in the direction that most heads want.'

That's one of the justifications that Andrew Halls, headmaster of King's College School, Wimbledon, has given for reintroducing A levels alongside IB after six years as an IB-only school. 'The new A\* grade has begun to repair a reputation damaged by more than 10 years of grade inflation,' he argues. He has also admitted that 'for some pupils, the demands of pursuing six subjects in the IB combined with the commitment needed to excel in sport, music or drama can be too great.'

It can be confusing for parents when confronted by this maze of choice. But whatever diploma is offered, the teachers will teach to it. Janette Wallis of the Good Schools Guide suggests that this should not be a key element in parental choice. 'The qualification is not the most important aspect,' she suggests. 'It's the subjects offered and the way in which they are taught that matter most.'

Parents should be looking at the amount of off-syllabus work provided, says Stannard, and the range of outside speakers supporting teaching. 'Teaching and learning should always dominate, not exams.'

Stannard concludes by quoting Thomas Huxley, who was involved in devising the first public exams in the 19th century: 'Examinations are good servants but poor masters.'



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