

# Step up to prep

Naomi Bartholomew, HEADMISTRESS AT ST CATHERINE'S PREP SCHOOL, OUTLINES WHAT PARENTS SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A PREP SCHOOL



*Young girls from the senior school act as excellent role models for the younger pupils*

**P**rep schools come in all shapes and sizes; some in town houses in residential streets, others with rolling acres and fabulous facilities. The one thing that unites them all is a breadth and depth of curriculum that ensures that pupils have the very best grounding ahead of their senior schools.

Most prep schools will have a good number of subject specialists who are well equipped to teach their subjects and ensure that subjects, such as French, sport and music, are an important part of a varied curriculum. This, paired with primary experts who are trained and

experienced in guiding children through their earliest educational experiences, make for an outstanding start.

With such a breadth of choice, how can you be sure which prep school is right for your child? Here, we outline what you should consider.

## **STANDALONE OR THROUGH SCHOOL?**

A through school, like St Catherine's, is able to provide the best of both worlds, with a warm, family feel and strong pastoral care. This, coupled with access to the facilities of a much larger

school – including a swimming pool, playing fields, auditorium and sports hall – are what attract the very best staff; teams that are dynamic, forward-thinking and ambitious for the children in their care. We're also lucky in that we can tap into a group of talented young women from the senior school, who act as excellent role models to younger pupils.

Standalone prep schools, on the other hand, often have strong links with particular senior schools, and it's worth looking at lists of leavers published by the school to see their typical paths. If you already have somewhere specific ►

*Naomi Bartholomew encourages her students to get involved with activities outside the classroom*



in mind, find out what the links are between the prep and senior school of choice.

#### **OUT OF HOURS**

As pupils and teachers begin to develop powerful relationships in the classroom, this will be reflected in any extra-curricular programmes they partake in, too. This usually consists of a mix of activities such as sport, music, drama, chess, debating, and at least one or two quirky options, such as logic club or go-kart making. It's through these extra-curricular activities that friendships and confidence can be built, and children learn to understand their own strengths and interests, while finding other like-minded pupils.

#### **SINGLE SEX OR CO-ED?**

Here at St Catherine's, we believe that girls (and boys) are best taught in single-sex environments, which can

## THROUGH **EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMMES**, CHILDREN CAN BUILD THEIR CONFIDENCE

cater fully for the needs of the pupils. However, parents must make that choice based on their child's individual needs, and do plenty of research before and during their tour of a school. Ask, 'How will this school cater for my child, and ensure that they reach their potential?'

#### **WHERE DO YOU START?**

Have you visited the school, or spoken to parents with a child already there? Both of these are important steps. I recommend that parents start to look at prep schools for 4+ entry once their child is established at nursery, and they have some sense of what their interests and abilities are. I would then expect parents

to be considering options for 7+, when their child is in Year 1 for entry into Year 3. It's important to visit a school more than once, and to allow yourself time to consider your options carefully.

Equally important are family logistics – for example, it's essential to consider what's manageable in terms of the school run. Prep-aged children are still young and will need downtime around activities and homework during the day. A commute of more than 20 minutes is something you need to consider carefully, so check that the school's hours work with your family. Is there after-school care or a breakfast club? That may make all the difference. **1**