



ALICE PHILLIPS
Headmistress, St Catherine's
School, Bramley, Guildford

Below,
pupils at St
Catherine's,
Guildford



AGE:
11/13-18 years
FEES* (PER TERM):
FROM £5,850
-£9,635

SENIOR

CHOOSING A SENIOR SCHOOL

Alice Phillips explores educational aspirations and recognising your child's needs, when deciding on where to go next...



Remember:
your child is
an individual
with their own
requirements



Left, St
Catherine's,
Guildford,
above,
Campbell
College,
Belfast

taking you on tours at break times! Expect to speak to both staff and pupils. Are the classroom doors open, so that you are encouraged to look at what is happening...

Try to picture your son or daughter there. Does it feel right? If the answer is "yes", it almost certainly is. Your gut reaction is a very good indicator.

OTHER PARENTS

Word-of-mouth recommendation is manna from heaven for heads and registrars. It is consistently the number one way that we know parents find out about us.

But there are caveats too – you will hear, largely, only very positive reports. Equally, some parents may choose to malign a school for, valid, or highly pejorative reasons, which may spread on the dinner-party circuit.

Tread carefully – listen and mull the information but set it against the positives you have heard, and better still, visit the school. Remember, your child is an individual with their own requirements – allowing your daughter, for example, to choose a school aged 11 on the basis of a close friendship at her prep school, is not a sound reason on its own.

CURRENT SCHOOL'S HEADTEACHER...

He or she is a very good source of advice which should be sought. They will have an understanding and appreciation of your child's personality, interests and abilities. Another caveat, however, is that prep schools can often send their pupils on the same well-trodden and trusted route. The "big-names" such as Eton, Westminster and Wycombe Abbey are, understandably, feathers in prep schools' hats. Make sure you explore alternatives.

LEAGUE TABLES

While league tables provide some useful data they need to be used with discretion, especially with regard to the independent sector. At St Catherine's, along with many other prestigious independent schools, we have made the conscious decision to teach IGCSEs rather than GCSE in many subjects – because we have considered them more demanding. But government league

OPEN DAYS

They are a must. Draw up a long list at least two years before your child is due to move on from his or her current school. Have a list of criteria to look out for on an open day – and try to see a school on "normal" working days.

At St Catherine's, our open days occur during the school week – no special

weekend offerings are provided, which may be inconvenient for busy working families, but we argue it is much better to experience a school "warts and all", rather than when it is empty of classes or pupils.

At the open day, observe how comfortably students and staff converse and interact, and the discipline and manners around the school. Be wary of schools which avoid

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tables do not recognise IGCSEs, resulting in some independent schools appearing far lower in the tables than they should.

Another useful indicator is “Added Value” – the majority of schools worth their salt can boast a string of top grades for very bright and motivated students without adding very much value along the way.

However, independent schools will be able to tell you their results in relation to prior pupil ability through tests undertaken on entry, e.g. MidYIS (Middle Years Information System). You may find these far more useful than raw league tables.

ETHOS AND FEEL

Every independent school is unique – as such you will expect certain specific features. Not least, expert teaching, an inspiring learning environment, a raft of extra-curricular activities and an ultimate desire in encouraging pupils to aspire to do and be their very best in their chosen career.

When you tour the school do pupils have a sense of purpose? Does your guide speak with obvious pride and enjoyment about their school experiences? Do you feel that this is a school which supports your own values? Does the school preserve its



traditions but also does it embrace what is successful modern practice?

DAY OR BOARDING?

Do not judge your own experiences of boarding school with today’s version. Founded as both a day and boarding school, St Catherine’s girls benefit from this successful “hybrid” arrangement.

The advantages of weekly boarding for professional working parents are numerous. Not least, it removes that twice-daily commute, affording your son

Above, St Catherine’s, Guildford, below, Clayesmore School, Dorset

or daughter the time at school to take advantage of the full range of facilities.

If you are still unsure whether your son or daughter will like boarding, schools offer “taster sleepovers”. Parents say boarding encourages children to be independent in a secure environment and instils confidence and develops social skills.

SINGLE-SEX OR CO-ED?

Some parents have very fixed ideas and know exactly which system they prefer, but if you are unsure, then visit both types of school. Factors to be taken into account include age of entry.

Girls’ schools, like St Catherine’s, have always set theirs at 11+, so be prepared for fewer places to be available at 13+. This has traditionally been the age boys transfer to senior school.

OUTCOMES...

There is one very special document which I am often seen waving at parents on open mornings – the Destinations of Leavers. Your child’s chances of securing a place at the chosen university can rise or fall on the quality of a UCAS submission as well as those GCSE or A-Level grades – choose a school which places importance on both.

The Destinations of Leavers statement is an excellent barometer of a school’s success measured against its aims – ensuring its Sixth Formers achieve the right place for their chosen degree, leading to fulfilling future lives and careers in a rapidly changing world. 🎓



Parents say boarding school prepares their children for a globalised world, encourages them to be independent and instills confidence

