



# INDEPENDENT & STATE: PREP SCHOOL GUIDE

CHELSEA EDUCATION

consultancy



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Our Bespoke Service

# 1. INTRODUCTION

In general, the word 'Preparatory' or 'Prep' relates to independent schools whose original purpose was to 'prepare' pupils for entry to Public Schools on a competitive basis – by passing the Common Entrance exam at ages 11, 12 or 13. To clarify, 'Public Schools' are in fact private schools, not state schools; the private schools referred to as 'public' tend to be the oldest and most exclusive like Eton, Harrow, Charterhouse, Westminster and others.

Nowadays, there are considerably more private schools in the senior sector and the term "independent senior school" is more generic. Prep schools still prepare children for entry to these schools, but some parents want to send their children to a good private school before switching them to a state school at age 11. In our opinion, this is a perfectly reasonable strategy as long as there are good state schools in the area.

Prep schools typically cover students aged from 7/8 until 11 or 13. The words "Pre-Preparatory" relate to schools in the younger age range from 2/3 until 7 or 8. Some schools call the period before the age of 5, 'Nursery' or 'Reception'. Thus Prep and Pre-Prep combined are equivalent to the term 'Primary' in the State sector. The majority of Preps/Pre Preps are day schools, but a small number also offer boarding.

Often, these are part of a senior boarding school and some schools cater for children throughout their entire education from the ages of 3 to 18 years. These are known as 'all through' schools and they can be attractive to some as they offer a complete education in a well-known and settled environment. The advantage of being in an 'all through' school is that your child tends to progress naturally into the senior school. An example of such schools are Dean Close School in Cheltenham and Claremont Fan Court School in Esher. However, if you are 'on the outside', there might be a waiting list to get it but on the other hand, children can find it stifling being at the same school for 15 years. You need to consider whether the school that was right for them aged 3, will still fit their needs at age 16.

We hope you find this guide helpful!

*From the team at  
Chelsea Education.*

## 2. When do children start Prep/Primary schools in the UK?

English children are required to be in school by the time they turn 5, which means they have to start school in the term preceding this birthday. Generally, a child will start school in the September following his or her 4th birthday, therefore we do advise parents to start planning where your child will go to school, at the least by the time they are 3 years old!

The first year in any primary school is called the Reception class and is still part of the Early Years Foundation Stage, which comprises government guidelines on education from birth to age 5, that are followed by nurseries, Pre-schools and Reception classes of all primary schools. After they have completed Reception class, your child will be at least 5 years old and start Year 1, which forms the first year of the Key Stage 1.

Making the matter slightly confusing, most state primary schools and some private pre-prep schools, for example Knightsbridge School and Garden House school, both in London, also have a nursery class for children aged 3-4. In addition, a very small number of independent pre-preps like Arnold House in St. John's Wood only start in Year 1, without offering a Reception class.



### 3. WHEN TO REGISTER YOUR CHILD FOR A SCHOOL?

In state primary schools, you generally apply the year before the first term, so you have to apply to your local educational authority in the autumn or winter of the year preceding the September entry, when your child is 3 years old or just turning 4. The exact dates can vary by local authority, but the usual timetable is between the September and January prior to the September entry and you can easily apply online on your local authority website. In the April preceding the September entry, you will receive notification of a school place, which must be accepted by May.

In state primaries, there is nothing you need to do until the year before your child starts school, other than seeking out information so you can choose your preferred school. For private pre-preparatory schools, parents should generally start planning ahead much earlier, although there are huge differences between the schools and some do require very early registration.

As a general overview, there are three types of private pre-preps when it comes to registering a child:

#### **a) Register at birth**

Operating on a first come first served basis, several of the Notting Hill pre-preps require registration as soon as possible following birth, for example Pembridge Hall and Norland Place schools.

#### **b) Register before child's 2nd birthday:**

These are so popular that they close the registration list after they have received a set number of registrations, for Example Knightsbridge School, Arnold House or Falkner House School.

#### **c) Register at least one year prior to entry:**

These schools keep lists open until the year before entry, for example Horris Hill and Hill House schools.

## 4. LOCATION

With more than 2,000 independent schools of which more than 1000 are Prep/Pre-prep schools, there are choices in every region. Most parents are looking for a day school within a 10 miles radius or less of their homes, whereas it may be possible to be more flexible when their children gets to the age of 11. Parents need to be sure that their child has a realistic chance of getting a place, as the good state primaries in London tend to be oversubscribed.

The majority of the best state (free) primary schools in London are in the boroughs of Richmond, Kensington and Chelsea, Wandsworth, Barnet, Camden, Greenwich and Westminster. Unfortunately, many outstanding state primaries have faith-based admissions criteria which can make it hard for international students to gain a place. Most Catholic or Church of England schools will expect you and your child to be of the faith and actively participate in weekly church services to be eligible for admission. Community primaries generally admit children by proximity to school, as measured by walking distance. In oversubscribed schools, you often need to live within half a mile walking distance to the school to obtain a place.

As well as many outstanding state primary schools, Central London offers a wide range of fantastic private schools. For the top independent pre-prep schools good areas to move to are North London (Hampstead and St. John's Wood), South-West London (Richmond, Wimbledon, Parsons Green) and Central London (Belgravia, Chelsea, Hammersmith, Holland Park, Knightsbridge and Notting Hill).

Many international parents usually begin their search in London, but you should be aware that there are very few boarding schools in London itself and no Prep boarding schools! However, there are several very prestigious prep boarding schools in the Home Counties within a 50 mile radius of London and children can attend there as weekly boarders.





## 5. UNDERSTANDING 4+, 7+, 8+, 11+ AND 13+ ASSESSMENTS

When parents hear about all the ‘pluses’ out there, they can get quite confused about how often your child will be tested over the first 10 years of his/her life. All the ‘pluses’ serve a different purpose and your child might be able to avoid many of these tests. By choosing a school that is pre-prep and prep, you can minimize the number of assessments. Luckily, these days there are more and more options for children aged 4 – 13 such as Knightsbridge school.

Let’s look at them in more detail:

### **Age 4+:**

Assessment for Reception entry, done by some Central London independent pre-preps, mainly looks for social skills, curiosity and school readiness.

### **Age 7+:**

Test for entry into prep schools comprising of English, Maths and Verbal Reasoning papers.

### **Age 8+:**

The original test for prep school entry. 7+ became more and more common though as each school tried to get the brightest candidates a year ahead.

### **Age 11+:**

This is an important exam for transfer to secondary school. It is used by state Grammar schools in some areas, as well as (mostly girls’ or co-educational) independent schools. It includes English, Maths, Non-Verbal Reasoning and Verbal Reasoning papers.

### **Age 13+/ “Common Entrance”:**

This is a test for 13 year olds, mainly boys, for entrance into the country’s top boarding schools. Some girls take the Common Entrance for entry into co-educational boarding schools such as Marlborough.

## 6. WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE INDEPENDENT PRE-PREP ASSESSMENT?

Many popular independent schools run assessments in order to narrow down the registration list of around 200 candidates to the 20-40 children chosen for the Reception class. At this young age, schools mainly look for social skills that suggest the child will fit into the school community such as observing for children who can share and socialize in a small group. They will probably read a story to check if your child can sit and listen and they will ask questions on the story they have read.

### **Additional tasks carried out individually might be:**

Recognizing and writing of your child's name, correct scissor use, putting a picture story into a sequence, recognizing numbers to 10 and/or count to 10.

There is nothing really to prepare for this day, what is required is just to make sure your child picks up these social skills in the first years of their life. If you read bedtime stories and encourage storytelling and communication at home, the assessment tasks should present no problems. All good nurseries will also teach children about sharing toys and being polite to other children and adults.





## 7. THE COMMON ENTRANCE AND SCHOLARSHIPS EXPLAINED

The Common Entrance examinations are used for assessing pupils who transfer from Prep Schools to Independent Senior Schools at ages 11+ and 13+. The Independent Schools Examination Board is the regulatory body for the Common Entrance exam. The exam papers are set by examiners appointed by the Board and the answers are marked by the Independent Senior School for which a candidate is entered.

### Scholarships

Scholarship candidates are selected by the Independent Senior Schools and they are required to sit the Common Entrance Scholarship Examination at the relevant senior school.

### If English is not your child's first language

Candidates usually take the Common Entrance examination at their own school in the UK and overseas. If a candidate does not have English as a first language then bilingual dictionaries can be used in Mathematics, Science and Humanities. They are also allowed up to 25% extra time if they have not studied in an English speaking school for more than two years.

### Learning Difficulties

If a Prep School is entering a candidate with a specific learning difficulty (SpLD), they should contact the relevant Independent Senior School and arrange how much extra time is available to the candidate to complete the Common Entrance papers. They should also send an Educational Psychologists report.

### Subjects

All candidates must take compulsory papers in the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. In addition to this, most Independent Senior Schools expect candidates to take exam papers in Geography, History, Religious Studies and a language.

### Entry Levels & Pass Marks

Schools can set differing standards and pass marks for their entrance exams and some schools use their own test papers. The Head of your Prep School will usually know the requirements for your target Senior School.

Independent Senior Schools set specific entry levels for the Common Entrance and together with the written exam papers, also ask for a reference from the Head of the Prep School.

Entry levels and pass marks vary considerably from school to school. At Charterhouse and Harrow it is 60%, including 55% in Maths and English and at Westminster the pass mark is 70%. Overseas applicants might be required to sit the school's own entrance exam papers rather than the national Common Entrance exam and proficiency in English needs to be demonstrated to the target Senior School.

## 8. HOW GOOD IS THE TEACHING AND PASTORAL CARE?

There are well over 1000 Preps/Pre-Preps in the independent sector of which approximately 500 belong to the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS) and/or the Independent Schools Council (ISC). We do feel that it is important for a school to have the necessary accreditation, although if a school is not a member of IAPS or ISC it does not necessarily mean it is a weak school.



## The School Staff

In many Preps and small schools, the Head will also teach and thereby set the standards and tone for his/her staff. Good schools will list their teaching staff and their qualifications and hopefully you will be allowed to meet a few and form your own impressions.

A measure of a good school is a low staff turnover; you should be able to get a feel for these factors by looking at the school inspection report.

## School Inspections

All schools are subject to regular school inspections and the frequency of these inspections vary from school to school depending on a variety of factors. For some schools, inspections may be up to six years apart whereas others may be every three years.

They are carried out by different bodies, depending on a school's affiliation. The majority in England are done by the Independent Schools Inspectorate on much the same principles as OFSTED for state primary schools. In Wales it is usually done by ESTYN and in Scotland by HM Inspectorate of Education working for The Scottish Executive.

These reports are usually available online, but since they can sometimes be difficult to locate, it is fine to ask the school for a copy. Please be aware that some schools print abbreviated versions, which tend to highlight only the good bits. Ask to see the full version even if you have to wade through all 60 pages!

## Your Child's Security

Parents need to be assured that if their child is boarding they need to be safe and secure and that all the school managers and staff take reasonable care to see that this is done.

## Pastoral Care

Pastoral care very naturally follows on from school discipline. The school attitude to boarding organisation or day pupils may be rated by some parents as paramount. Parents should also find out how the academic work is monitored, whether or not there is a personal tutor for each pupil and how pupils are assessed during their time in the school.

Also, is there supervised prep/homework at the end of the school-day? It is helpful to know the support systems that are available for your child and who should be contacted if you need help and advice.

## Your Child's Progress

Parents also need to know how to get information about their child. Are there regular meetings with pastoral and teaching staff? Are there school functions that parents can attend during the term? Is there an association for parents to join or a regular newsletter or magazine that tells them what is happening in the school? Parents should enquire about the arrangements for health care such as how many trained nursing staff are available and how often is there a doctor's surgery visit?

## Guardianship

If a parent is outside of the UK, whether they are UK or Foreign Nationals, arrangements must be made for each full boarding child to have a guardian who can take responsibility for the child, particularly outside of school hours at half term and school exeat.

For UK nationals, there is often a relative to undertake the role. For others, the services of a Guardian must be secured and some schools will have teamed up with a guardianship services company, though such services are not cheap – so remember to factor in these costs.



## 9. SCHOOL FACILITIES

Today most schools in the independent sector spend a great deal of their budget on the design of their buildings and in providing outstanding facilities for their pupils. Parents should ask to see the school library and enquire about the sports area and whether or not the school has a sports hall. Most Prep schools today should have well-equipped IT centres and it is no longer surprising that many children aged 11 or younger are more adept with computers than their parents! If your child is interested in the creative arts you should ask to see the Art department and find out what different types of materials pupils can use in their studies. However, you should also bear in mind that great facilities do not necessarily make a great school!

Many independent schools offer a huge range of activities – from sports to arts to music to outward bound courses. It's crucial to consider that these opportunities are invariably extensive and you will be charged an extra fee for most of them – if not for the specialist teacher then for the equipment. In prep schools, sports and music are always well catered for – in contrast to the diminishing availability in state schools.

A school will always provide you with a list of their activities; for those with a rather anxious child it may be a way of motivating them to overcome their hesitations.

## 10. SPECIALIST SCHOOLS

There are 5 specialist music schools – Chetham's, Yehudi Menuhin School, Purcell School, Wells Cathedral School and St Mary's School, Edinburgh – they all run Prep Schools in addition to senior and Wells is the only one which also offers pre-prep.

Many schools offer Performing Arts, however the only specialist school which takes pupils into its prep school is the Arts Educational School in Tring.

Many boarding schools will cater for children with special needs (such as dyslexia). However, there is a difference between those which accept solely special needs pupils and those who accept a minority of say 10% of their total pupils.

# 11. UNDERSTANDING OF LEAGUE TABLES

Most English newspapers publish Primary schools league tables which reflect standardized test scores of children at state primaries in English, Maths and Sciences. They publish several performance measures that you can use to rank the schools:

## **% with Level 4 in English/Maths or above:**

This measure tells you what share of pupils in the class have reached a satisfactory level in the given subject.

## **% with Level 5 in English/Maths:**

This measure tells you what share of pupils in the class have reached a very high level in the given subject, which is a good indicator of the proportion of able or high achieving pupils in the school.

## **Average point score:**

The total average point per pupil across all subjects.

## **Contextual Value Added (CVA):**

This is a measure of how well a school did to improve pupil performance from when they started school to when they took the test. It is calculated by taking standardized test results from Key Stage 1 and using the SATS test used for league tables, which are administered to children in Key Stage 2. It's a good way of judging the quality of teaching taking into account the ability level of pupils at the school.

## League Table Data

The league tables also show the average scores for your borough and for England in order to judge how a given school fairs against the national and local averages. No similar data is published for independent primaries and unfortunately, something like less than half of independent schools are prepared to publish their results. However, as a generalisation the Key Stage 2 (age 11) scores for independent Preps who belong to the Independent Association of Prep Schools (IAPS) are 20% higher than state schools.

## Destination of Leavers

In the absence of exam scores, a key measurement for private prep schools is the Destination of Leavers, which is published on the school website to see which senior schools they have a good track record preparing for. If you are selecting a prep to ensure that your child gains entry to a specific independent senior school, you need to find out the school's track record for enabling pupils to achieve entry to their first choice senior schools. We use leaver destinations as a measure of the teaching quality of a prep school and can discuss this information further with our clients.

Below is an example we have put together comparing the average number of boys sent to Eton per year (based on entry lists 1996-2001) with the total number of pupils at the school.

Ranking	Prep School	Location	Eton Entry total	Total Students
1	Summer Fields	Oxford	29	255
2	Ludgrove	Wixenford	20.5	195
3	Cothill House	Abingdon	19	250
4	Dragon School	Oxford	16.5	630
5	Caldicott	Farnham Royal	9.5	251
6	Westminster Under School	London	9	270
6	Sunningdale	Sunningdale	9	105
8	Ashdown House	Forest Row	8.5	210
9	Milbourne Lodge	Esher	7	199
10	St Paul's Prep	London	6	434



## 12. INDEPENDENT PREPARATORY VS A STATE PRIMARY SCHOOL?

This discussion comes up in many parents' forums, so we have prepared a summary of the usual debates here.

### Arguments in favour of state primary:

- Might be closer to your house in your neighbourhood.
- Your child can socialise with a more representative mix of children from your neighbourhood.
- Many have extended services up to 6pm for working parents at a low cost.
- Class sizes of 28-30 children offers your child a wide variety of friendships.
- No tuition fees, generally cheaper school uniform as well as cheaper trips and activities.

### Arguments in favour of independent pre-prep:

- More individualized care and small class sizes.
- Wider range of extra-curricular activities.
- Preparation for 7+ or 11+ exams.
- On average higher academic standards and pupil achievement, though it depends on the school.

If you find a state primary that you like, it might be a good idea to start there and see how happy your child is. If you feel at some point your child is not thriving, you can still switch to a private school later. In a state primary, parents will have to be more proactive about enriching their child's school work with extra hobbies and activities and making sure the child advances well academically, whereas good independent pre-preps tend to offer the full package.

Our advice would be to find a school with an energetic and enthusiastic headmaster, with teachers who express great care for their students and with children who look happy and engaged - without worrying too much if it is state or independent.

## 13. VALUE FOR MONEY

UK Prep/Pre-Pre Schools can cost anywhere from £3,500 to £18,000 per annum for day students.

The cost of a UK boarding education may initially appear high, but when you take into account the quality of the teaching, the small classes, the high level of care and supervision, the good accommodation and food, the excellent academic and sports facilities and the numerous extracurricular activities- it represents a very cost-effective package. The fee varies depending on school; the 2016 Independent Schools Council (ISC) Annual Census revealed that the average boarding fees per term for pupils at ISC-member prep boarding school fees are a little less, at an average of £7,572 per term for boarders and £4,590 per term for day pupils.

Fees are payable in advance and overseas account holders may be required to give a substantial deposit, generally one term's fees. Fees are charged per term – invoices are sent out before the beginning of term and the fees should be paid in full by the first day of term. Many schools offer a variety of payment methods, ranging from lump-sum payments to monthly direct debit. All schools require at least one term's notice of withdrawal of a child, otherwise another term's fees may be payable.

Fees do usually include tuition and most recreational activities, accommodation and food for boarding places. It may also include basic laundry and textbooks, but uniforms will not usually be included. 'Extras' will be put on the bill for the next term, so be sure to find out what these may be before you incur additional expenses. Likely extras could be private music lessons, horse riding, dry cleaning and outings such as theatre trips.

It has been estimated that extras can add between 5% and 15% to the school fees you are paying, so it is always wise to ask for a complete breakdown of fees and extras when considering a particular school.

If you are a non UK resident, you will also have travel costs home during the holidays or extra accommodation and guardianship fees. Whilst you can be surprised by the size of boarding school fees, do not forget to take into account the other costs you are saving – the daily home taxi service ferrying children to and from school, meals at home, heating, light or activities!



## 14. OUR SERVICES

We would be extremely happy if this short guide shined a light on prep schools and gave you more information to be able to make a well informed decision if needed.

However, if you feel that you would require professional help you are welcome to request our bespoke placement service, where we would help you through the full process of registering your child to a prep school of your choice. Please do contact us on 02071931676 or fill in an enquiry form and we will be glad to give you our best advice.