

AN INDEPENDENT CHOICE FOR PARENTS

By Rob Buckley

A child's education is a huge responsibility for any parent. With more and more parents concerned about the quality of education in the state sector – or at least in the state sector in their area – independent schools are increasingly being considered as the best way for children to get the start in life they need.

Finding the right school can be difficult. That made the Independent Schools' Show, held in Battersea Park, London, between the 30th and 31st of October, a valuable opportunity. It gave parents the chance to talk face-to-face to representatives from more than 120 schools from the UK and the rest of the world in just one place. It also gave them the opportunity to meet with other organisations that can provide independent advice, tutoring and other activities for children. In addition to this they were also able to attend talks giving advice on important topics such as whether to pick a day school or a boarding school and whether to go for a single sex or co-ed school.

Popular

Speaking prior to the event Camilla Smith, the event's manager said, the show was even more popular than it was last year. "We had 2,500 families across the two days, but we've already had 3,500 sign up through our web site this year." She claims the increase is down to more targeted marketing, with organisers Next Step Exhibitions, giving away copies of the show magazine through multi-title publishers Archant Life.

The show saw at least the same number of schools and other organisations exhibiting as last year. "We have letters from schools delighted to have signed up with the show," continued Smith. "85% rebooked which can only be a good thing in these times."

Exhibiting schools included such well-known institutions as Cheltenham College, Wellington College, Marlborough, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Harrow. There was a also a mix of co-educational, single sex, day and boarding schools, as well as sixth-form colleges.

Exhibiting organisations also included schools from as far afield as Sydney and India as well as tutoring organisations. "We're seeing an increase in the number of tutoring agencies," she added. "It's an area that's really growing."

"We noticed the same thing," says David Spencer, director of Tutors International, exhibitors at the show. "What jumped out this year was the number of other tutoring companies exhibiting." As well as Tutors International, Bonas Macfarlane, Enjoy Education and Fleet Tutors all had stands.

Tutoring agencies can both supplement and be an alternative to schools, and are primarily becoming popular because of the ever-increasing competitiveness for places at top universities and for top-notch exam results. Most agencies offer hourly tutoring after school or at weekends, but Tutors International, offers full-time

placements of tutors. "Tutoring is often needed when things go wrong or when people are between schools," explains Spencer. "Some kids get bullied, some get suspended or expelled. What happens when you move to Dubai and discover all the good schools are already taken for example?"

Spencer cites the example of some parents who needed a married pair of tutors, who could speak Japanese, and who were prepared to go on a yacht cruise for a year – his company was able to successfully recruit tutors for the job.

With so many schools exhibiting, however, it could have been difficult for parents to filter through all the information available to make a decision. A number of independent organisations were available to offer advice however, including consultancy Gabbitas Education, the Independent Schools Council Information and Advice Service, The Parents Directories and the Boarding Schools' Association.

Helen Moriarty, national director of the Boarding Schools' Association who spoke during one of the education talks, said the association was there to explain the modern face of boarding. "Some parents wanted to know if it's different from when they boarded. Some just wanted to know what it's like." Moriarty found that many parents were unaware of the possibility of weekly boarding or that children who boarded would be allowed to stay in contact with their parents. And many had different motivations for sending their children to boarding school other than the perception of wanting to get the children 'out of their hair'.

Even with full-time boarding, many schools are situated around the SE and London so that parents can visit frequently. Schools further afield will often advertise themselves as 'only a two hour train ride away'.

Preference

While Moriarty won't express preferences about particular schools, she did offer visitors information on whether schools have particular facilities that suit those parents' needs. "All schools are my members," says Moriarty, "but if I think I have an answer because I visited one recently, I'll let parents know." Certain schools are well known for having particular expertise, for example, with Reed's School in Surrey having a tennis academy and St Felix School getting ready to field four swimmers in the 2012 Olympics.

She also points out that the show offered a chance for parents to ask about bursaries and scholarships, which, in this cash-strapped time, should help almost any parent with the biggest obstacle associated with private education: the fees. "Schools try to be helpful, so it's always worth talking to them," she advises. "I spoke to one school recently and they said, 'We have bursaries available but no one applied.'" It would seem that as well as information, there were opportunities to save considerable money at the Schools Show. **an**

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