

my child in school



# Applying for a School

a practical guide to  
parents' legal rights



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**If there is  
anything in this booklet  
you don't understand or if  
you would like more information,  
please call our free advice line  
on 0808 800 5793.**

## Important notes

- This booklet is based on the laws of England.
- This booklet does not apply to children with a statement of special educational needs. Use the ACE booklet **Getting the Statement Right** or the **ACE Special Education Handbook**.

## Some definitions

### Admission authority

The body that decides the rules on how children will get a place at the school and who is offered a place.

### Choice advisers

Each LA funds an independent service called Choice Advice to help parents find their way through the secondary admissions process. In some areas Choice Advisers also cover primary and in-year admissions.

### Governing body

The governors, with the headteacher, have overall responsibility for the school. They work for the school unpaid.

### Guide

We use this to refer to the local authority's composite prospectus with details of all the schools in the area.

### LA

The local authority deals with the administration of a local council. The education department may be part of the LA's children's services authority or trust.

### Oversubscription criteria

The rules about who has priority for a place when a school does not have enough places for all children who apply.

### PAN

The published admission number is the number of children that each school has agreed to admit each year.

# “I need to apply for a school place for my child – how do I go about it?”

All parents want their children to be happy and do well at school. Applying for schools can be a worrying and stressful time for families. This booklet should help you to decide which schools might suit your child and to understand how the application process works.

Use this booklet if:

- you are applying to a state-funded school in England
- your child is about to start school for the first time
- your child is moving up to a different stage of schooling
- you want or need a change of school for your child
- you or your child are applying for a sixth form place in a school.

## When to start?

If your child is starting school for the first time or moving on to another stage of education it is important to start early. Start thinking about schools about a year before you need to apply. Remember that the deadline for applications can be well in advance of your child starting at the school.

### Primary

In England it is compulsory for children to be in education from the term after they turn five. This is known as statutory school age. However, in most areas children start school in reception class when they are four. It is not too early to think about schools as soon as your child has turned three.

If you think your child will be too young for school at four, you can ask for the place to be held open until later in the same school year.

If you do this, remember that you still need to apply at the normal time or you could lose out on a school place.

## ACE advises

Remember that you must still apply formally for a primary school place even if your child is already in the nursery class at the school you want. There is no automatic transfer from nursery to reception class.

## Secondary

Children start secondary school in year 7 the September after their 11th birthday. Applications are made in October of year 6, so start looking at schools when your child is in year 5.

## Other ages of transfer

In some places you may have to apply for a separate junior school for year 3. Other areas have a system of middle and high schools. Again, it is important to check deadlines and start early.

# Your child, your preference

## Choice or preference?

You may have heard a lot in the media about extending school choice for parents. This can be misleading. What all parents have is a right to express a preference for a school and to give reasons for their preference. This is not the same as having a right to choose a school. If a school is oversubscribed, there will be rules about who has priority for a place. You may be given your preference but you may not.

## Starting with your child

Remember that you are looking for a school for your own particular child. They will have their own individual needs and strengths. Think about what will be important to your child at school. If your child is already in school find out what matters most to them about school life.

Make a list of the things you want to consider. These will be different for every child and family. Some of them might be:

- friends going to the same school
- facilities for arts, music or sport
- after school activities
- breakfast club
- extra help for special needs
- good pastoral care
- enrichment activities for more able children
- size of school and teaching groups
- style of uniform
- particular exam courses
- school of a particular faith tradition
- single sex or mixed
- school close to home or easy to get to by public transport.

## Making up your own mind

All parents want the best for their children and there may be plenty of rumours about schools doing the rounds. However, it is vital to find out the facts and make up your own mind. Do not rely on hearsay or prejudice. Remember that reputations can lag well behind reality. Below are some common reasons given by parents for wanting a school.

### **“Everyone says it is a good school.”**

Schools can get good and bad reputations unfairly and can change very quickly with a change of head or staff.

### **“It has a formal uniform so the discipline must be good.”**

Uniforms and discipline don't always go together. Remember 'good discipline' means different things to different people. Some children thrive on a very strict system whilst others benefit from a more collaborative approach.

### **“It does well in the league tables.”**

Performance tables show the results for the whole school in tests, assessments, exams etc. Tables cannot show how well your own child may do nor how happy they will be. Some secondary schools are high up in the tables because they select the most able children. Value added tables measure children's progress rather than results, so check these out too.

### **“It is brand new and has wonderful facilities.”**

Worn but well-maintained older buildings can be just as welcoming. New buildings can also have teething problems. If there are state of the art IT facilities, check how far these are available to all children.

# Finding out about schools

## Local Authority Guide

Each LA must publish a 'composite prospectus' with information about all the schools in their area. In this booklet we shall call this the Guide. Most LAs produce a separate Guide for primary and secondary schools. A new Guide is produced in September each year. It will tell you how and when to apply for schools.

You can get a copy of the Guide from:

- your local authority website
- LA offices – e.g. admissions section or a 'one-stop shop'
- any state school in the area.

The Guide will tell you details of all the schools in the area including:

- type of school (community, foundation, academy, voluntary aided)
- single-sex or mixed
- whether the school is selective – and how pupils are selected
- any religious character the school has.

The Guide will also tell you how many children each school takes in each year and how it allocates places under its oversubscription criteria. More information on oversubscription criteria is on page 7 of this booklet.

You can also apply to a school in a different county or borough from the one where you live. You will need to get a copy of the schools' Guide from that LA.

## Other information

Apart from the general school Guide you can find more information about individual schools from:

- school prospectus or website
- school profile – this provides a summary of pupil achievement, a summary of the Ofsted report and other information updated each year by the school. Find school profiles from the schools finder website <http://schoolsfinder.direct.gov.uk>
- Ofsted inspection reports [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

The school will also publish particular policies and other documents for parents. These may be available from the school's website or direct from the school.

You may wish to look at:

- home-school agreement
- statement of school's ethos
- special educational needs policy
- behaviour policy and anti-bullying policy
- sex education policy
- disability equality policy
- race equality policy
- uniform policy.

## Types of school

The admission authority is the official body which decides the rules on how children will get a place at the school and who is offered a place. Different types of school have different admission authorities. **The headteacher is not part of the admission authority and plays no part in deciding admissions to the school.**

Type of school	Details	Admission Authority
Community	Local authority schools	LA
Voluntary Controlled	Church schools which are now run by the LA like community schools	LA
Voluntary Aided	Mostly set up by churches or other faiths and a few by charities. Admission criteria may give priority to children of a particular faith	Governors
Foundation/Trust	These schools are run by their own governing body	Governors
Academies	Funded by the government and private sponsors. They operate as independent schools but do not charge fees and admit pupils of secondary age on a similar basis to other state schools.	Governors

# Visiting schools

As well as looking at written information it is important to visit schools to see for yourself. Most schools will arrange open days or evenings. It can also be a good idea to visit during the school day to see how the school normally operates. Try and see what happens in the playground and corridors as well as in the classrooms. Make a list of questions to ask or things to look out for. For instance:

- Is the school welcoming?
- Do the pupils seem happy and relaxed? Are you able to speak to pupils?
- Are the staff approachable? How do they interact with the children?
- Look at noticeboards and displays. Is there a parents' noticeboard or area?
- How does the school involve and inform parents?
- How does the school vary the teaching for children of different abilities?

## Tests

For certain schools your child may be asked to take a test. Check the date of the test and where your child needs to go to take it. If your child misses the test they could lose out on a place at the school.

There are different sorts of test:

**Banding tests** Some comprehensive schools use fair banding as an oversubscription criterion. Children will be tested and put in a band according to their ability. The school will admit children evenly across the bands to make sure there is a balanced intake.

**Entrance tests** Grammar schools select children of high academic ability. Only children who have passed the entrance test can be given a place at the school. Some schools are partially selective and only some of the places are dependent on an entrance test.

**Aptitude tests** Some schools select up to 10% of children based on an aptitude for a particular subject like languages or music. These assessments must not test children's previous knowledge in the subject or select them on general ability.

Children with disabilities or special needs may be able to have special arrangements such as extra time, a scribe or rest breaks. If your child needs special arrangements, make sure you tell the people arranging the test well in advance.

# Checking the admission rules

Once you have got information about the schools you are interested in, look closely at the admission rules. By law these must be easily understood, objective and fair for all groups of children.

## Oversubscription criteria

All schools must have published rules (oversubscription criteria) to decide which children get places. These are used when schools are popular and have more applications than places available. It is important to check how well your child meets the criteria and what the chance is of a place.

All community schools in an area will generally have fairly simple criteria set by the LA. Other types of school such as foundation, voluntary aided or academies set their own criteria. Faith schools are allowed to give priority to members of a particular church or faith and there may be rules about church attendance.

Common oversubscription criteria are:

- pupils in local authority care
- pupils with a brother or sister at the school
- pupils living in the school's catchment area
- pupils attending a named feeder school
- pupils who live closest to the school.

It must be clear how the distance will be measured.

- pupils with an exceptional social or medical reason for going to that school. Generally only a very small number will get places for this reason.
- fair banding for secondary comprehensive schools. Children will be allocated to a number of ability bands and a set proportion admitted from each band.
- random allocation (lottery). This may be the main way of allocating places or a tie-breaker.

The order in which the rules are applied should be clear and there must also be an effective tie-breaker.

You should be able to find out from the school or the admissions section at the LA how places were allocated in the last year. Find out how many children got places in each category. If distance is an issue, how near the school did parents have to live to get a place? All this information will give you an idea of your chances of a place at the school.

Remember, however, that circumstances can change from year to year. For example there may be an unusually high number of siblings or a lot of young families moving into an area. The number admitted and the oversubscription criteria may also change over time.

## Published Admission Number

All schools have a set number of children that they take each year. This is known as the Published Admission Number (PAN) and applies to the year when children start at the school – generally reception or year 7.

## Unlawful arrangements

There are also rules about what schools and LAs are not allowed to do.

They must not:

- give priority to children based on their parents' jobs, educational level or marital status
- give priority to relatives of ex-pupils
- take account of a child's past behaviour or attendance or that of other family members
- ask for financial contributions from parents
- interview parents or children
- ask for photographs except to identify children taking a test.

If you think a school or local authority is breaking the rules, you can complain to the Schools Adjudicator. See Further help on page 13.

### ACE advises

The admission rules may be complex. Make sure you understand them fully before you fill in your form. If you need help see Further help on page 13.

# Making an application

## Applying during the normal admissions round

This section covers applications when your child is starting school for the first time or moving up to a different stage of schooling.

Local authorities must now have co-ordinated admissions schemes. This means that you fill in a single form (Common Application Form) instead of applying separately to lots of schools.

### Secondary schools

Secondary school applications are co-ordinated across LAs. You only fill in one form even if you are applying to schools in more than one LA. You must be allowed to express at least 3 preferences and put them in order. If schools have more applicants than places then the oversubscription criteria will be applied. If you would qualify for more than one school you will be given the school you ranked highest. You will be given a single offer of a school on national offer day at the beginning of March. If you do not meet the criteria for any of your preferences you will be offered an alternative school, usually the school nearest to your home that has places.

### Primary schools

Primary school admissions work in a similar way. The main difference is that the co-ordination is currently only within each LA so you will need to fill in a separate form if you are applying to schools outside your area. There is also no minimum number of preferences set out in law for primary schools.

#### ACE advises

- Put the schools in the order you really want.
- List as many preferences as you can. Only listing one or two schools does not increase your chance of getting them.
- Make sure that your list contains at least one school that your child has a good chance of getting into. Otherwise you may risk getting none of your preferences.
- Take a copy of your form and get a receipt or proof of delivery.

## Things to watch for

**Dates** Do not miss the closing date for the common application form. Also check dates for supplementary forms and any tests your child may need to take.

**Priority categories** If you think your child fits a particular priority category you must mention this on the form for it to be considered. Check what evidence you need to provide.

**Address** What proof of address will be needed? If parents live apart and a child spends part of the week with each, whose address can be used?

**Siblings** Check who counts as a brother or sister particularly if stepfamilies are involved.

**Medical or social need** Do you need a letter from a doctor, psychologist or social worker?

**Supplementary forms** Some schools, particularly faith schools, have a supplementary form. This is an extra form for further information about things like church attendance. Check where and when you need to send this and what evidence you need to provide.

## Applying at other times

This section applies if your child is changing schools or you want to apply for a school outside the usual time of entry. This might be because you have moved house, because you feel your child needs a different school or because your child has been permanently excluded. These applications are often called in-year or casual applications.

Make sure you apply in writing, as some schools may try to discourage in-year applications. Any decision on admission must be made by the admission authority, not the Head, the school secretary or anyone else. In-year admissions will be co-ordinated by LAs from the 2010/11 school year. Until then ask the LA whether you apply to the admissions section or directly to the school. You do not need the agreement of your child's current school.

If the school you want has a place available in your child's year group it has to admit your child. The only exceptions are for wholly selective grammar schools or for certain excluded children.

Even if schools tell you they are full, you can still apply and, if turned down, you must be allowed to appeal.

## Excluded children

If your child has been permanently excluded you still have a right to apply for another school and appeal if turned down. However, a child who has been twice permanently excluded within the last two years may be refused a place and you will have no right to appeal. If your child has challenging behaviour, but has not had two permanent exclusions, they may be turned down for a place in a school which has serious problems, even if it is not full. In this case, you can appeal. For more information relating to exclusions see the ACE booklet *Permanent Exclusion*.

## Fair Access Protocols

Every LA must have a Fair Access Protocol. This is to make sure that children without a school place can get back into education quickly and to ensure that all schools in an area admit their fair share of children with challenging behaviour, including children excluded from other schools. You can find details of the Fair Access Protocol in the LA schools' Guide. Schools can admit a child over the published admission number if the child is being placed under the Fair Access Protocol. Children placed under the protocol must take precedence over any on the waiting list.

## Sixth form applications

Admissions to school sixth forms (year 12) do not have to be co-ordinated by LAs, so you will probably need to apply direct to the school. For admissions from September 2010 onwards, young people are able to apply for a sixth form place in their own right. They also have a right of appeal if turned down. Parents also have a separate right of application and appeal. Young people already in the school do not have to apply formally but a school can set minimum academic criteria. Entry to year 12 must not be dependent on previous good attendance or behaviour.

# What if I'm unsuccessful?

## Waiting lists

Every school must have a waiting list for applications made during the normal admissions round. The list must be kept open until at least the end of the autumn term after the new intake has started. Some schools also keep waiting lists for in-year admissions. Ask for your child's name to go on the waiting list for any school you have applied for.

Children are ranked on the waiting list in the same order as the school's oversubscription criteria. The waiting list must not give priority to children based on when their names were added to the list. It is important to remember that your place on a waiting list can go up or down. As soon as places become available they must, except in limited circumstances, be filled from the waiting list, even before admission appeals have been heard.

## Appeals

If you have not been given your preferred school you can appeal for any of the schools for which you applied. You can appeal for as many as you like. For more information about appealing see the ACE booklet *Appealing for a school*.

# Further help

## From ACE

ACE freephone advice line **0808 800 5793**

Information and free advice booklets can be downloaded from [www.ace-ed.org.uk](http://www.ace-ed.org.uk) or by contacting ACE (see back page).

## From your Local Authority

**Admissions section** Contact the School Admissions section of your LA for copies of the local schools' guide, for a common application form and for information on local procedures.

**Choice advice** Contact the choice advice service in your LA for general help in understanding the system and in filling in the form. Priority may be given to disadvantaged groups.

## From the Department for Children, Schools and Families

Primary and Secondary School Admissions and Appeals: a Guide for Parents

School Admissions Code

School Admissions Appeals Code

These can be downloaded free from [www.dscf.gov.uk/sacode](http://www.dscf.gov.uk/sacode)

## From the Schools Adjudicator

The Schools Adjudicator considers objections to schools' admission arrangements.

[www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk](http://www.schoolsadjudicator.gov.uk)

**0870 001 2468**

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Thank you.

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