

Education Advisers eGuide



*How to Choose the Right
International Baccalaureate
School in the UK*



Education Advisers Ltd

UK Private School Consultancy service

Choosing the right private school for your child can be an overwhelming and nerve-racking experience for the whole family. It is, without doubt, one of the most important decisions you will make for your child. Your child's school will play a huge role in forming positive and resilient characteristics, developing talents, building confidence, and preparing them to face our ever-changing world. It is therefore essential you are confident you have fully investigated all suitable options, and are sending your child to a school in which they will thrive both academically and emotionally.



Since 2004 Education Advisers Ltd has supported over a thousand British and international families in identifying and gaining entry to the best-fitting schools. Our commitment is to provide completely impartial advice, and to ensure you and your child are fully informed and prepared from the very beginning until they are happily enrolled in a school.

The process of identifying and applying to schools need not be stressful. Managed with expertise and empathy, it should be the first step of an exciting and life-changing journey for your family.

We produce these guides to provide parents with what our experience tells us are the most important considerations when navigating your child's education. We hope you find this guide on How to Choose the Right IB school a useful resource with which to begin your journey.

We also invite you to request a free initial 20-minute phone consultation to explain your objectives and learn more about the most suitable strategy for your individual circumstances.

Mary Murayama BA (Oxon), MA (Sheffield) QTS - Managing Director

Our core services

Our key commitment is to find the best-fitting private school options for any particular family or child. Our advice is completely impartial, and led by each family's priorities and requirements. We offer a range of bespoke consultancy services, but most fall into one of the following categories:

- Education for Life strategy and consultancy service for new parents
- Day school advice and enrolment service (Ages 2-19)
- Boarding school advice and enrolment service (Ages 6-18)
- 6th form applications, day or boarding
- Full consultancy and school enrolment service for families relocating to the UK
- Full consultancy and school enrolment service for families with dyslexic or SEN children
- Personalised pupil assessments in English and Maths
- Consultancy and mentoring for elite school applications
- Summer School recommendations
- University application consultancy service

Please note we do not offer visa, tutoring, guardianship or home relocation services. However, we can offer some initial advice, and introduce relevant, reputable service providers with whom we frequently collaborate.



Background to The International Baccalaureate (IB) in the UK

Before we consider how to choose an IB school, here is some background. The IB is a global curriculum which offers an education to children from age 3 – 19, and encompasses four programmes. The IB aims to focus on teaching students to think critically and independently, and how to inquire with care and logic. The programmes encourage both personal and academic achievement, challenging students to excel in their studies and in their personal development. The IB curriculum is now offered by over 5000 schools throughout the world and is overseen by The International Baccalaureate Organisation or IBO in Switzerland.

The four programmes are:

1. The Primary Years Programme (PYP) for students from 3 to 12
2. The Middle Years Programme (MYP) for students aged 11 to 16
3. The Diploma Programme (DP) for students aged 16 to 19
4. The Career-Related Programme (CP) for students from 16 to 19

It is the IB Diploma Programme (DP) which has come into prominence in the UK, largely because a number of schools felt that the traditional A-level curriculum was too narrow and in many cases no longer sufficiently stretching when more than 90% of candidates could achieve A*-B grades. The IB DP is a 2-year programme which requires academic rigour, genuine breadth and coherence. Successful candidates can gain entry to more than 700 universities worldwide.

The IB is highly regarded by universities worldwide. In terms of the UCAS tariff which awards points for each qualification, a maximum IB score of 45 would equate to 276 UCAS tariff points, the equivalent of almost 5 A* grades at A-Level. The key difference here is that most pupils take 3 or 4 A-levels whereas all IB students take 6 courses and therefore tend to end up with more UCAS points. In general, universities will not favour students who have taken one curriculum but will be looking at the grades they achieve within that qualification.

How many schools in the UK offer the IB?

So, where can you study the IB? Currently there are 129 schools in the UK which offer one or more programmes of the IB, of which 75 are independent, fee-paying, schools. We list all of them in our geographic search engine on our websites. We publish league tables of IB schools based on their average IB points score each year and these can be viewed on best-schools.co.uk and on IB-schools.com. The latter site lists a selection of the top global IB schools in addition to those in the UK.

The official IBO does not publish individual schools' results and a number of schools will not reveal them, from which you may draw your own conclusions.

THE IB DIPLOMA- Age 16-19

The DP curriculum is made up of the DP core and six subject groups.

The DP Core

The DP Core consists of three elements:

Theory of Knowledge (TOK) – assessed through an oral presentation and a 1,600 word essay (From the IBO website): As a thoughtful and purposeful inquiry into different ways of knowing, and into different kinds of knowledge, TOK is composed almost entirely of questions.

The most central of these is "How do we know?", while other questions include:

What counts as evidence for X?

How do we judge which is the best model of Y?

What does theory Z mean in the real world?

Through discussions of these and other questions, students gain greater awareness of their personal and ideological assumptions, as well as developing an appreciation of the diversity and richness of cultural perspectives.

Extended Essay – an independent piece of research

Students must write an extended essay up to 4000 words on a topic chosen by the student, related to the subjects being taught within the IB. This is intended to show the kind of independence, analysis and writing skills expected by universities. It is a valuable first experience of individual research.

Creativity, activity, service (CAS) – students must complete a range of activities alongside their academic studies to be awarded the IB Diploma, but no points are awarded for this element

Subjects

Within the IB Diploma, subjects are offered at Higher Level (HL), Standard Level (SL) or both. To qualify for the Diploma a student must pass at least six subjects, of which three must be Higher Level. Subjects are divided into six groups and one or more must be selected from each group, with the exception of Group 6. Please note that not all schools will offer all subjects within each group so it is important to check with each school what is available.

- Studies in Language and Literature (normally taken in a student's first language and available in 55 languages (Literature) and 17 languages (Language and Literature))
- Language Acquisition (can be at beginner level, or HL or SL for students with prior knowledge of the language)
- Individuals and Societies (business management, economics, geography, global politics, history, information technology in a global society, philosophy, psychology, social and cultural anthropology, world religions (SL only))
- Sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, design technology, sports, exercise and health science, computer science, environmental systems and societies)
- Mathematics (analysis and approaches (HL/SL), applications and interpretation (HL/SL))
- The Arts (dance, music, film, theatre, visual arts)

How is the IB assessed?

A candidate can receive between 1 and 7 points for each subject, plus a total of up to 3 points for the Theory of Knowledge and The Extended Essay. This amounts to a maximum score of 45 points which a small number of candidates actually achieve each year. A diploma is awarded to those scoring 24 or more.

What is the difference between the IB and A-Levels?

You can see from the above that the IB requires a broader range of knowledge and skills than those demanded by taking three A-level subjects. The huge difference is that a linguist is challenged to learn a science and that a scientist must learn a foreign language. This keeps university options open longer, and ensures that students have a broad range of skills when they enter professional life.

One criticism would be the non-availability of certain subjects such as media studies, and the fact that it would not be possible to study more than one visual or performing arts subject within the IB. It is also not possible to take all three traditional science subjects (biology, physics, chemistry) a combination often favoured by aspiring medics or engineers. However, universities do not insist on this and in many cases prefer students to have the broader experience of the IB programme. The IBO provides a huge amount of support and resources and IB schools often set up joint projects which add much more interest and fun to projects.

THE MIDDLE YEARS PROGRAMME (MYP)- Age 11-16

The MYP is a framework which includes eight subject groups covering all major academic disciplines:

Language acquisition

Language and literature

Individuals and societies

Sciences

Mathematics

Arts

Physical and health education

Design

Schools can include other subjects not part of the MYP framework and each year students also do an interdisciplinary unit encouraging them to make connections between subject areas and the real world. There is also a compulsory personal project which is internally marked and externally moderated.

Teachers use a variety of tools to assess student progress including oral presentations, essays, tests and projects. They apply the IBO assessment criteria to student work and can opt for official IBO certification via MYP eAssessment so that students can earn a formal, internationally-recognised certificate if they meet the success criteria.

THE PRIMARY YEARS PROGRAMME (PYP) - Age 3 to 12

The PYP focuses on the development of the whole child, including social, physical, emotional and cultural needs. It simultaneously gives a strong foundation in maths, social studies, drama, language, music, visual arts, science and physical education. As befitting of the IB concept, pupils are encouraged to be aware of the points of view of people in other parts of the world. The PYP is an inquiry-led, transdisciplinary framework, which challenges children to think for themselves as they explore a range of local and global issues.

It is built around five elements:

1. Knowledge, which is both disciplinary, represented by traditional subject areas (language, maths, science, social studies, arts, PSPE) and transdisciplinary
2. Concepts, which students explore through structured inquiry in order to develop coherent, in-depth understanding, and which have relevance both within and beyond subject areas
3. Skills, which are the broad capabilities students develop and apply during learning and in life beyond the classroom
4. Attitudes, which contribute to international-mindedness and the wellbeing of individuals and learning communities, and connect directly to the IB learner profile
5. Action, which is an expectation in the PYP that successful inquiry leads to responsible, thoughtful and appropriate action.

As with the MYP there are only a small number of schools in the UK offering the PYP at present. These are almost all the international schools catering primarily for the global expat community.

How do you choose an IB school?

The essential factors influencing choice are the same for any independent school (see later) but first you have to find an IB school.

(a) Location This is not overly difficult to the extent that there are so few schools offering the IB at present that your initial choice will be heavily influenced by area and availability. The majority of IB schools are coincidentally in a circle around the Home Counties and Greater London.

(b) Type of IB School. Some IB schools are truly “international schools” like ACS, Marymount, Dwight, United World College and The International School of Aberdeen. Others have adopted the IB DP as an alternative to A Levels, such as North London Collegiate, King’s Wimbledon and Wellington College.

(c) You need to decide if you believe in the IB concept as a lifetime education or just a better alternative to A levels. The real problem is that if you want your child to study the IB before the age of 15 there are only a handful of schools that offer this, and virtually all are day schools in and around London.

(d) Academic Performance. A good starting point for considering a senior school will be the average points scored in the DP in recent years. Despite the fact that most headteachers try to deny the relevance of league tables, all of the mature IB schools proclaim their successes on their websites. However, be aware that some schools refuse to publish their results in a way that makes fair comparisons possible.

(e) Subjects available for the DP. If your child is a teenager and has already decided they want to specialise in the sixth form, in say music or art or all sciences, then you should question whether an IB school is the right choice. Some IB schools will have a slightly wider subject availability in the DP range than others. Some will offer A levels at the same time. If this is important to you, then be sure they are not planning to discontinue them. It’s going to be more difficult to judge a school which has only offered the IB for 2 years as opposed to 10+ years.

(f) Day or Boarding. A fair number of IB schools do not offer boarding which cuts choice even further if you need a boarding school.

Top 10 Criteria for Choosing a School

1. Does the school fit the basic requirements for you and your child?

- Age range, gender, day or boarding, religious denomination, curriculum offered
- Day/boarding pupil mix
- Do you want weekly or full boarding?

2. Does it meet your education life stage objectives?

- Does it fit with the plan you have for your child's education?
- Do you want your child to be prepared for entry to a particular senior school?
- Are you "mix 'n' matching" with state education?

3. Do you think your child can be happy there?

- What do other parents/children say about the school?
- Ethos
- Academic or wide ability?
- Teaching and learning styles/expectations
- Special interests

4. Does it have a good track record?

- SATS results, high- or low-pressure environment, teaching quality: qualifications and experience
- What are the leaver destinations? Does it get the pupils into first choice senior schools? Do its pupils gain many scholarships to senior schools?

5. Do you like the ethos of school?

- Invariably set by the Head
- What does it say its aims and values are?
- How does it feel when you walk around?

6. What is the teaching like?

- Quality of teachers, staff turnover
- Curriculum
- Size of school/class sizes
- School discipline and rules
- School inspection report

7. What are the pastoral care facilities like?

- How is the welfare of your child provided for by school staff, medical care, after school provision?

8. Does it offer a range of facilities your child would use?

- Access to facilities and activities both during and after school clubs, cost?

9. Is the location optimum for you?

- How important is area: town or countryside?
- Is the school-run manageable in the daily rush-hour traffic?

10. Does it give YOU value for money for what you want?

- Value for service delivered, fit with your budget, extras

1. Your basic requirements

1.1 Starting Age

The highest demand for the IB in the UK is for the Diploma Programme at 16+. This is also only category where it is possible to measure exam success. The vast majority of private schools in the UK that offer the IB DP take children from either 11 or 13, but up to the age of 16 they will follow the UK curriculum and take GCSE/IGCSE exams in Year 11.

Only a handful of pre-prep (age 3 - 7) or prep (ages 7 to 11/13) schools in the UK offer the PYP or MYP, and these will be the international schools.

If you have a child younger than 11 and you have your sights set on a particular senior school only, you might wish to find a prep school which acts as a feeder school to your chosen senior school. The advantage of being in an “all through” is that your child tends to progress naturally into the senior school. If you are “on the outside” your child is likely to have to take entrance tests .

1.2 Gender

There are of course girls only and boys only schools, but there is a definite trend for schools to go co- ed, especially in the 6th form. The arguments rage about the merits of single sex education with many claiming there is no difference in academic achievement in single sex schools. However, this is a difficult premise to support, when there is strong evidence that girls’ only schools do tend to produce the best academic performance. There are very few single sex schools offering the IB at 16+.

At the end of the day, this is very much down to parent’s preferences. Do not be afraid to discuss the subject with the school on your visit.

1.3 Religious Denomination

Most independent schools in the UK are affiliated to a particular faith or denomination. You will find Church of England, Roman Catholic, Quaker, Methodist, Jewish and Muslim schools although virtually all schools will accept pupils of any faith or none. If your views are particularly strong, then discuss them with the school.

1.4 Subjects taught

Schools that teach the IB at 16+ will offer all the core academic subjects, but they may not offer particular languages or performing arts subjects. If your child has particular aspirations, it may be difficult to find a school with the required subjects, so please contact us for advice if this is the case. You may be advised to consider A Levels as an alternative 6th form curriculum.

1.5 Proportion of day and boarding pupils

If you are looking to board a child, we would recommend caution if fewer than 25% (or 50 in number) are boarding, because it is not a true boarding school and will be rather deserted at weekends when the day pupils leave. This is not an absolute rule and indeed cost may be a factor because such smaller schools will usually be cheaper. We simply point out that your child does need companionship at the weekends and a variety of activities to keep them interested and happy.

2. Will your child be happy?

Of course, it is vital that your child is happy, especially if they are going to a boarding school. Certainly you should explain the advantages of independent schools beforehand. However, the key point will be your visit to your shortlisted schools. Certainly if it is a senior school, you should try to let your child have some input into your decision. A happy child is going to be more motivated to do well. Of course, you are not going to know the answer about boarding until after they get there – so what can you do?

Most boarding schools have “taster boarding days or weekends” If in doubt, let your child road test the school. If possible, let your child have a say in the choice of school. If you visit say three schools, he or she will inevitably have a preference. In most cases they will be stamping their feet and proclaiming “I want to go to that one!” – usually the one which stretches your pocket the most with the Olympic sized swimming pool and equestrian centre! (Tip – if you really cannot afford it – don’t visit – because junior does not usually appreciate the depth of your wallet or lack of it!)

See as much of each school as you can, including the actual accommodation, if boarding. The headteacher will set the tone, but be sure to meet the particular housemaster or housemistress as well. Above all, try to visit on a school day so that your child can meet and chat to other boarders. Of course, your child will be anxious and nervous, but meeting new friends who will invariably be having great fun and the time of their lives will go a long way to settling their nerves.

3. Academic Track Record

3.1 How do you assess exam performance?

The IB schools measure the success of their pupils by the number of points they achieve in the IB Diploma. The maximum score achievable is 45 and amazingly a small number of students achieve this each year. We show the average points achieved by each cohort of students in our league tables. We would expect most independent schools to achieve an average of 30 points or more. There are many factors that parents may take into account when trying to choose what they consider to be the ‘best school’ for their children. However, the truth is that there is no school that is best for every child. We can look at exam successes to determine which is the “best school measured by academic achievement”, but the real challenge for parents is to choose the “right school” which will take into account lots of factors in addition to exam results and we will come back to these later.

However, academic results can be tabulated and that is where most parents start their evaluation. It is not possible to have an endless list of criteria, and perhaps the most common approach is to look at the academic standing of a school and judge whether or not it meets the expectations of parents. Certainly there are other factors that parents might wish to see, such as sports facilities, strong departments in the creative and performing arts and perhaps the provision of special needs teaching. However, for the purpose of the league tables on our websites, we have taken strictly academic criteria and applied them to produce lists of best schools in terms of academic success. We feel that this is a good starting point for parents setting out to choose a school for their children, as long as they are academically gifted. Remember that not all children will thrive in highly focused academic environment and you could be doing your child a disservice simply by trying to pick a school with the best exam results – we will revert to this point later.

Quite a few independent schools have specialist units for children with special educational needs such as dyslexia. It could be surmised that the inclusion of such children “dilute” their overall results. Interestingly, this is not usually the case. The mere fact that such schools devote more time to small group tuition usually benefits the rest of the children and everybody’s standards rise at the same time.

4. Accommodation Options

At the youngest boarding ages, children will often be accommodated in modest sized rooms or dormitories of 4 to 8 pupils. They are usually encouraged to bring home comforts such as duvets, toys and games. As they get older, rooms tend to be either twin or single and are usually very well furnished with private space and storage. Many are also now en-suite.

Sixth form colleges are often in university cities and tend to treat the sixth formers to similar style university accommodation – either halls of residence or home stay with local families.

At the end of the day you are going to “pay for what you get”, but if there is a choice, you should at least weigh up the options of degree of comfort/privacy vs. price.

5. Ethos of School

Every independent school establishes its own ethos, which can best be evaluated by observing the behaviour of pupils both in and out of class. Are they well behaved in class? Are they working hard? Do they greet you in a polite way? Do they look happy? Are they neat and tidy?

If a school follows a particular religious denomination, that will heavily influence the school ethos. However, the most important factor is the headteacher, because he or she sets the entire tone for the school. You will only find out by meeting the headteacher and asking lots of questions, after which you will know if you like the ethos or not!

5.2 School Discipline

Areas such as the school policy on discipline can be an important consideration when you are trying to choose between schools. There can be very big differences between schools with a highly traditional approach and those that put the emphasis on self-development and learning by experience. What you will find is that there is generally a more structured environment in independent schools than in the state sector, but nevertheless quite big differences exist, as for example between schools such as Bedales and Bryanston on the one hand, and traditional schools like Wellington and Winchester on the other.

Only you can be the judge of what you prefer for your children. You should have that discussion with the headteacher of the schools you approach.

6. How good is the teaching?

6.1 What is the quality of the teachers and what is the staff turnover?

In many smaller schools, the headteacher will also teach and thereby set the standards and tone for his/her staff. Good schools will list their teaching staff and their qualifications.

Hopefully you will be allowed to meet a few and form your own impressions. A measure of a good school is low staff turnover. You should be able to get impressions of these factors by looking at the school inspection report.

6.2 How big are class sizes and the overall school?

You are “buying” small class sizes and individual attention by using private education – so you want to know that there are 20 or fewer students per class. However, you also want to know that the school is not too small. There are failing schools which can have fewer than five pupils in a year group. Then parents start to withdraw their children, making matters worse. Conversely, by the 6th form, you might want class sizes down to eight per subject.

6.3 What do the school inspection reports say?

All schools are subject to regular school inspections, but they may be up to six years apart. 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. In Wales it is usually done by ESTYN. In Scotland it is done by HM Inspectorate of Education working for The Scottish Executive. Some schools print abbreviated versions, which tend to highlight the good bits. Ask to see the full version even if you do have to wade through 60 pages.

7. Pastoral Care and Guardianship

7.1 Pastoral Arrangements

Pastoral care very naturally follows on from school discipline. The school attitude to organization may be rated by some parents as being paramount and parents should also find out how academic work is monitored, whether or not there is a personal tutor for each pupil and how the grading system works. It is helpful to know what support systems are available if your child gets into trouble and who should be contacted if you need help and advice.

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?

Lastly, parents need to be assured that if their child is boarding they will be safe and secure and that the school managers and staff take all reasonable care to see that this is attended to.

7.2 Guardianship

If a parent is outside of the UK, whether they are British 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 exets. There may often be a relative to undertake the role. For others, the services of a Guardian must be secured. Some schools are prepared to undertake the role themselves. Others will have teamed up with a guardianship

services company. Such services are not cheap – so remember to factor in the costs.

We can refer you to a reputable guardianship company if necessary.

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 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!

It is wise to check out costs before you visit any school. Most schools offer a limited number of bursaries and scholarships. However, be aware that most schools are oversubscribed with applications for admission and always receive more requests for such discounts than they have places available. Also, there are very few scholarships at prep level because children have had insufficient time to display academic merit.

Most interested parents are committed to an independent education as long as it fits their budget. However, we all want to feel we are getting value for money. Part of this evaluation is to compare what one school provides against another in relation to cost.

So, how do you decide? What next?

After researching the school profiles, forming a short list and requesting brochures, get yourself a questionnaire to evaluate your shortlist during school visits. If you are a UK resident seeking a prep school, never forget to ask the Head of your child's existing school. He or she will likely know the local schools that will suit both your child's academic progress, temperament, interests and talents.

There is absolutely no substitute for a personal visit – did you like the school, the premises, the facilities, the atmosphere, the Head, the teachers and the manner of the pupils? You will be invited to attend on an Open Day, but is it possible to visit on a normal school day, when you can experience the daily routine?

Lastly, after doing all of your research, go back to basics. The real starting point for choosing a school has to begin with you, your hopes and aspirations for your children. You know them better than anyone else and can best judge their strengths and weaknesses. You are in the best position to know what type of school will work best for them. Although your schooldays were some time ago, the essentials in the 21st Century remain the same as when you were at school. Literacy and numeracy plus knowing the difference between right and wrong count for as much in the modern world as they did when you were a school-child. You need to match the qualities you consider right for education with those offered by the right school.

It is a huge decision. There are so many different schools and in locations like London, many are over-subscribed. We have tried to write this e-guide as a “do-it-yourself” help guide. However, we recognise that many parents could become confused by too much choice. If so, please remember that we carry out bespoke consultancy assignments for parents in return for a fee. It is usual for us to ‘map out’ the strategy for a whole life-stage plan to aim for the best senior schools to follow the prep school.

Education Advisers Ltd

Contact us for a no-obligation
initial consultation

Tel: +44 (0) 1622 813870 / 812852

Email: info@educationadvisers.co.uk

Websites: www.educationadvisers.co.uk

www.best-schools.co.uk

www.bestsummerschools.co.uk

www.sixth-form.com

www.bestprepschools.co.uk

www.best-sen.schools.co.uk

www.ib-schools.com

