A Parent’s Guide to preparing your child for ‘Big School’ (N.I.) SAMPLE

By Deborah Fitzsimmons

Illustrations by Sasha Khairuddan
Introduction

We all remember how daunting an experience it is ending primary school education and moving on to the 'Big School'. For some children, it can be traumatic leaving friends, teachers and the familiar surroundings of a primary school behind them. As parents it is only natural to have lots of questions about the options available and how you can best prepare and support your son or daughter with the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

This book is written from a parent’s perspective, drawing on my professional experience as a teacher and knowledge gained as a parent. My aim is to share with you information about the process, explain your options and offer guidance during this crucial stage of your child’s progression.
CHAPTERS

Chapter 1  The Transfer Process
Chapter 2  Entrance Tests
Chapter 3  Preparing your child for the transfer test
Chapter 4  Decisions on school preferences
Chapter 5  Preparing your child for Big School
Chapter 6  Uniform, Uniform Rules and Initial costs
Chapter 7  Settling In
Chapter 8  School Life, Routines and Rules
Chapter 9  Who’s who in the Secondary School
Chapter 10  Opportunities for parents to get involved
Chapter 11  The Road To Success
Chapter 12  Supporting Your Child’s Mental Health
Chapter 13  Preparing For Examinations
Chapter 14  Moving forward
Chapter 1 The Transfer Process

The current system

In the current unregulated system in Northern Ireland, parents’ have the option to make an application for their child to sit entrance transfer tests. Public Grammar Schools, Voluntary Grammar Schools and a selection of Integrated Schools use common entrance test results as part of their admission criteria to access the school. Entrance tests are not required for most non-selective post primary schools. All post primary schools will, however, have an admissions criteria policy.

Common Entrance Assessments

There are currently two types of entrance tests, The Association for Quality Education (AQE) or GL Assessment (GLA). Tests currently focus on literacy and numeracy skills. However, the style and approach are different. It is also
worth noting that some post primary schools only accept one type of transfer test or the other. In other cases, a school may accept both. It is strongly advisable to check schools’ admissions policy to clarify. There are three AQE tests which occur over three Saturdays. There are two GL tests which take place on the same day. Transfer tests usually take place between November and December of the child’s primary seven year in a local test centre. The application process opens early in May, in the child’s primary six year, therefore parents are already beginning to consider and make decisions about their son or daughter’s secondary options in the primary six year.

*Information included in this chapter:*

*Common Entrance Assessments*

*The Application Process*

*Post Primary Open Events*

*Transfer Test Results*

*Post Primary Induction Events*
Chapter 2   Entrance Tests

There is still much debate about the fairness of an unregulated entrance test system and whether if, one should exist at all. However, without formal agreement in parliament, many schools will continue to use AQE and GL Assessment tests as part of entrance criteria set for the school. Parents also seem to be voting with their feet, as the numbers of pupils sitting transfer tests continues to rise. This system has been operating for a number of years, however, there is a strong possibility that it will change again.

Having experience of teaching in both selective and non-selective post primary schools, I believe every child is different and finding a school that is most suitable for them is the most important aspect of your decision. This was certainly the biggest priority in my mind, when making decisions on school preferences for my own children. You know your child better than anyone else; therefore the suggestions that follow are based solely on my own
professional opinion as a teacher and personal experience as a parent. I believe that it is important as a parent to have high expectations. However, they should also be realistic. Therefore I hope that the following information will help you and your child to make the decision as to whether or not to proceed with an application for entrance tests.

*Information included in this chapter:*

*Internal Assessment, including Key Stage Assessments*

*External Assessments, including NFER, CAT, Progress in English and Mathematics*
Chapter 3 Preparing your child for the transfer test

Should you decide to proceed with application/s for your child to sit common entrance tests, a great deal of commitment and patience will undoubtedly be required. I am sure there are some children who have achieved great results from limited practice. However, from my conversations with extended family, friends and colleagues, it seems even the brightest children are being tutored and prepared. A large number of primary schools provide an after school club for this purpose. In addition, many parents are putting in extra hours at home to support their child’s studies or paying a subject specialist to tutor their child.

As a parent, you might be wondering how to begin in supporting your child. The first and most important step is being involved in your child’s learning, particularly in their primary six and seven years. It is also good to compare notes with other parents who have children in other schools regarding homework workload and content, particularly in literacy and numeracy. In primary six, this might include daily spellings, reading, mental maths and an extended literacy or numeracy homework. In primary seven the level
of difficulty and time required to complete extended homework may increase with the addition of practice test papers.

*Information included in this chapter:*

*Access to Transfer Test Material*

*Private Tuition*

*Primary Seven*

*Test Strategies*

*Reading*

*Mental Maths*

*Prior to the Test*
Chapter 4

Other options to consider when making a decision on school preferences

In addition to school admission criteria to access a particular school of choice, there are many other factors that will influence you and your child’s decision in choosing a school. You may wish to consider: the school category, location, reputation, results, size, special educational needs provision, the curriculum, environment, cost, and most importantly; your child’s personal needs and interests.

Information included in this chapter:

Categories of Post Primary Schools

Location

Reputation

Results

Size of School

Educational Needs Provision

The Northern Ireland Curriculum

School Environment

Extra Curricular Opportunities
Chapter 5

Preparing your child for ‘Big School’

Information included in this chapter:

Building Confidence
Conversation
Praise and Rewards
Dealing with failure
Discipline
Developing Independence
Work Ethos
Resilience
Ideas for the Summer Holidays
Chapter 6
Uniform, Uniform Rules and Initial Costs

Information included in this chapter:

School Uniform

Equipment

Additional Costs

Information Communication Technology (ICT)

The School Canteen
Chapter 7 Settling In

Information included in this chapter:

Induction Day

The First Term

Organisation

Making friends
Chapter 8  School Life, Routines and Rules

Information included in this chapter:

Daily Routines

Religious Education (RE)

Break and Lunch Time

The School Calendar

Lockers

School Rules and Policy Documents
Chapter 9  Who’s who in the Secondary School?

Every school has a staffing structure. All members of teaching and non-teaching staff contribute to the leadership, management and day-to-day running of the school. Specific job titles and job responsibilities vary between schools. The following information aims to provide an overview of common key roles and responsibilities of staff in a post primary school. It is useful as a parent to know who to contact when you have a specific question or concern relating to your child.

*Information included in this chapter:*

*School Leadership and Management*

*The Pastoral Care Team*

*Subject Teams*

*Non-teaching Staff*
Chapter 10 Opportunities for parents to get involved

There are a number of ways in which you can support and become involved in your child’s education. There are many benefits for you, your child and the school. As a parent you gain a better insight into the school, your child’s learning experiences and how you can best support them at home. Teachers have a better understanding of home circumstances, parents’ views, and commitments. Working together creates a valuable support network for your child, ensuring your son or daughter follows the best pathway and achieves their full potential. The information below provides some suggestions as to how you can make a positive contribution to your child’s secondary education.

Information included in this chapter:

Induction Meetings

Parent Consultations
Requested Meetings

School Events

Parent Feedback

Parent Teacher or FRIENDS Association

Board of Governors
Chapter 11  The Road To Success

Information included in this chapter:

Attendance

Punctuality

Resources and Supplies

Classroom Learning

Workbooks

Homework

Intervention and support

Assessments and Examinations

School Reports
Chapter 12  Supporting Your Child’s Mental Health

Information included in this chapter:

What is Mental Health?

Helping your child deal with stress

Dealing with Bullying

Difficulties at Home

A balanced lifestyle

Warning Signs
Chapter 13

Helping Your Child Prepare For Examinations

Information included in this chapter:

Study Environment

Regular Study

Preparing for Examinations
Chapter 14  Moving forward

Information included in this chapter:

The Option Process

Career Research

GCSEs