

The Difficulties of Pre-Testing

Many senior schools now require pupils to sit some form of pre-test due to an excess demand for places. Robin Badham-Thornhill, Headmaster of Summer Fields, assesses the impact on both pupils and schools.

SUMMER FIELDS SCHOOL



AMONGST PREP SCHOOL HEADS, THE WORDS PRE-TESTING and Common Entrance encourage strong views and opinions. It is essential, however, to make sure that the whole idea of pre-testing is looked at from the point of view of the senior school as well as the prep school.

It is well known that many senior schools have moved to a form of pre-testing due to excess demand for places. It is better to know for parents and senior schools at the age of ten or eleven that a pupil will not pass into a senior school rather than wait until the age of thirteen. Indeed, it is suggested that one of the reasons Eton College moved to its present system was as a direct result of failing a lot of boys at Common Entrance. Certainly, prep school heads do not want any pupil to fail Common Entrance and pre-testing ensures that Common Entrance becomes even more of a placing exam. Most of the time, the best pupils are chosen. Some senior schools, however, have taken up the idea of pre-testing to avoid the feeling that they are being left out!

All senior schools have devised the system of testing which suits them best and this is where some of the problems arise. Usually, there is a computer-based or

written test which assesses a pupil's intelligence, an interview and a report from the prep school. Some have questionnaires for the pupils to fill in as well. The whole process is very time-consuming and how the process is administered varies from school to school. However, the great advantage to the senior school is that it gives them more control of numbers and the pupils they accept should be the best of the potential intake and not just those whose parents contacted the senior school at birth.

Prep school heads know that pre-testing is here to stay, even though many heads still favour those schools which organise entry solely through the Common Entrance exam at thirteen. It is perfectly possible to place the right boys in their senior school providing that there is a lot of consultation between the senior schools and the prep schools. Indeed, even some of the Common Entrance only schools have little pre-tests of their own, for example in the January before the CE exam, to make sure that a marginal candidate is likely to satisfy the examiners. Usually, tests in maths and English are taken and the senior school can give positive or negative feedback. If there is some doubt that a pupil may not pass the Common Entrance exam, alternative arrangements

could be made at this stage. So, whilst there are many advantages for pre-testing from the senior school point of view (mainly, that everyone knows that they have a place at the age of 10 or 11, subject to CE), there are disadvantages from the prep school point of view.

The main problem is that the whole pre-testing system can add even more parental uncertainty into the selection of a senior school. A parent needs to look at a number of schools because that parent does not know whether their son will be offered a place or not. Having looked at the schools, if there is a pre-test, potential pupils are invited to sit the test or assessment. The trouble is that the pre-tests can be spread over a staggering eighteen month period and so-called over-subscribed schools are often dealing with pupils who have to take tests at other senior schools as well. Some parents will accept a place at the beginning of this 18 month cycle but still sit tests at other schools. This means that many senior schools have the same names on their lists – perhaps some of the schools are not so over-subscribed as they think they are!

Pupils are required to visit a large number of schools and miss a lot of lessons at their own prep school. The results of the tests could come out in December in one year but the results of rival schools might not be known until fifteen months later. Meanwhile deposits have to be paid and pupils who are turned down by a number of pre-test schools lose confidence as a result. Schools that rely on Common Entrance alone do not have this prolonged period but they could have a name on their list which is also on a pre-test school list.

The senior schools are spending too much time on the administering of the tests themselves. Perhaps we should all be spending more time on the actual education of our pupils!

No parent wants their child to fail Common Entrance and, therefore, many do favour the idea of a pre-test. However, they do not like to hawk their child around the different schools and then be faced with a rejection or a waiting list place. We have moved into uncharted waters and it is high time that senior schools worked together more closely and came up with a more united and co-ordinated approach. Much discussion has taken place but very little agreement has been reached.

There are a number of difficulties with the administration of pre-testing – the fact that there is no standard report form for prep school heads to complete for each pupil, that the tests are held at different times of the year and that the test themselves are often very different.

Every senior school has its own report form for heads to use to describe each pupil and each form wants different information. The sheer quantity of reports demanded of a prep school head is getting out of hand. Like many other heads, I'm sure, since September I have written over 120 reports for senior schools and I still have the delights of the CE reports to come. There must be a standard report form which is acceptable to all schools.

Another problem is that the senior schools have the tests at different times of the year. Of course, there are

different arguments that can be used. Some people feel that to have a test in Year 6 is far too early for some pupils (not good for the late developer) but at least parents know where they are at an early stage. Others feel that it is better to have a test in Year 7 (better for the late developer) but this contributes to the problem of extending the pre-test season over a long period of time. There should be a cut-off time, agreed by all the senior schools, after which there should be no testing – for example, all senior schools should not have a pre-test after December in Year 7. This would make a big difference to parents and pupils and to the prep schools.

Some schools have computer tests and some schools have written tests. They can take a long time to administer but, essentially, they are all designed to find out the current and potential ability of a particular pupil. There have been occasions when a pupil has taken a test at one school and taken a very similar test at another school. Why can't a similar test be designed for all schools? If the senior schools could agree on a similar test, this would save a lot of time. Also, rather than travelling to all the senior schools, perhaps the test could be taken at the prep school. This is unlikely to be acceptable to those senior schools who have commissioned their own computer test. However, they could still use the information gained in an IQ test taken at the prep school.

Another real difficulty is if a pupil finds that the only offer received from a senior school is a Waiting List place. This means that parents then have to look at schools that may be able to offer them a definite place. Once this has been secured, the pupil could be promoted from the Waiting List place. This means that the parents have to reject the definite place in favour of the newly promoted place, often forfeiting a deposit as a result. Given that one of the original aims of pre-testing is to determine numbers at an early stage, this begins to take on an element of farce!

It is all very well to be critical and, maybe, the law of supply and demand will be the final arbiter. Pre-testing is better than pupils failing Common Entrance as a result of excess demand for a particular school. However, schools that rely only on Common Entrance should not change their policy. There is room for both systems, especially if pre-test reforms are made.

Selection for a senior school through a pre-test can be extremely complex for a pupil and his or her parents and the prep school. The situation is here to stay but some changes would make a real difference. Firstly, the senior schools should agree to have one report form to describe pupils that could be used by all prep schools. Secondly, the pre-test season must be shortened. Thirdly, a similar test should be designed for all schools.

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Attain welcomes comments from parents and schools – both prep and senior alike – on this crucial topic. Please email your letters to editor@attainmagazine.co.uk