

VALUE ADDED

With school fees set to rocket, many parents are asking if going 'state before eight' is the way to go. By talking to the heads of some of the country's top prep schools, **Laura Sutherland** learns what makes the early years worth the investment



On 29 July, Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced that as of January 2025, all education services supplied by a private school for a charge will be subject to VAT at the standard rate of 20 per cent. This Labour policy's swift transition from abstract prospect to grim reality will have been a cold sharp shock for independent schools across the country, and of course, families with children already enrolled in private education.

It also raises a big question for prospective prep-school parents – is it worth it? While many will be considering the 'state until eight' option, or waiting to make the expensive transition at senior-school level, at least as many must be wondering what their child would be missing out on.

"I can understand why parents may opt for the primary route – in Early Years especially, the curriculum foundation is strong," says Cranleigh Prep's (cranprep.org) outgoing head Neil Brooks. "Unfortunately, however, it can be hit or miss whether the primary school has the resources to get the most out of each individual." The Surrey prep's manifold resources include an abundant campus, a rich extracurricular programme, from outdoor survival club to pottery, as well as a strong learning development department that goes well beyond dyslexia and dyscalculia provision.

Its smaller class sizes – around 15 pupils (half the national average of 30) – also help ensure that each child gets the attention they need to identify talents and achieve their potential. "Boosts and stretches are deployed when needed," he explains, adding "we're as interested in character and all-round development as academic success".

Francis Holland Prep's (francishollandprep.org.uk) head Suzy Dixon agrees that there's a greater emphasis on individuals being able to uncover passions and nurture a love of learning within the prep-school classroom. "The national curriculum's Early Years foundation stage is excellently written, but we add more structured lessons to prepare children for the next stage a little earlier than state schools," she explains. "And it's not about hothousing – we're just following and feeding their natural curiosity: they're excited to know more."

At the Chelsea school, the progress of each girl is informed by a nuanced understanding of brain development and personalised support through teaching assistants, as well as collaborative outreach events with local primaries – "experiential interactions that help embed learning memories".

Outdoor teaching is a big part of the experiential learning that preps offer, and set across 150 leafy acres, Berkshire's Elstree School (elstreeschool.org.uk) endorses this approach wholeheartedly, starting from EYFS forest school. "We're big believers in outdoor learning and real-life experiences," reveals headmaster Sid Inglis. "And with so much space, we make the most of both opportunities. Classes are regularly taught outside, from science and geography to music, drama and art."

As a sector, independent schools have the capacity to offer a truly bespoke curriculum which builds on and enhances the already substantial national curriculum's framework. At South Kensington's Queen's Gate's junior school (queensgate.org.uk), this takes the form of a broader subject base, as well as inspired learning opportunities, ▶

BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS
PUPILS AT QUEEN'S GATE JUNIOR
AND FRANCIS HOLLAND PREP IN
LONDON AND ELSTREE SCHOOL
IN BERKSHIRE



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including in-depth projects, outdoor learning and character and leadership education. The junior school director Lydia Kyle explains “by offering a curriculum that’s broad and deep, our students receive a well-rounded education that inspires curiosity and develops essential life skills”.

The school’s specialist teachers, extensive range of extracurriculars – including a debating society, robotics club and music technology society – and advanced digital integration not only ensure it far exceeds the limitations of state primaries’ resources; they also fill youngsters with confidence and resilience, while preparing them for a technologically advanced world.

And when it comes to specialist teaching, Kentish Town’s Collège Français Bilingue de Londres (cfbl.org.uk) also delivers, with a bicultural French curriculum that’s broad, ambitious and crucially, taught in two languages. “Research shows that bilingual pupils tend to be better at multi-tasking, problem solving, and decision-making,” says headteacher David Gassian. “We also strive to give pupils a wide range of experiences and co-curricular clubs. Well-informed children are better equipped to develop confidence and deal with the ever-changing modern world.”

A robust pastoral care approach is a hallmark of modern independent schools. Queen’s Gate’s programme is deeply embedded in the school’s ethos, with a focus on the holistic wellbeing of each student. “School counsellors, form tutors and heads of year provide specialised support to meet emotional and social needs,” says Lydia. Similarly, at CFBL, a team of designated safeguarding leads (DSLs), deputy DSLs, school nurse, school psychologist, speech therapist, special education needs coordinator and teaching assistants work together to offer seamless student wellbeing support. Meanwhile, Francis Holland Prep believes that on-site counsellors are vital.

While a private senior school career is occupied with



academic achievements and fine-tuning talents, prep is where the blueprint for potential is drawn up: by nurturing individuality, igniting curiosity, identifying passions and instilling confidence and strong mental health, children develop a sense of character. “I met a lady recently who told me that while she now can’t afford to send her child to a fee-paying senior school, she believed that prep had been a more essential investment because it had such a foundational impact, and I’m inclined to agree,” says Suzy.

Claire Murdoch, head at Maple Walk Prep School (newmodelschool.co.uk) believes that the prep experience as a whole is a springboard for success, sharing “our pupils go on to senior school having had a wide range of experiences across the curriculum and this gives them the confidence to tackle new subjects”.

Neil Brooks agrees, concluding “spend your money where you think it counts – GCSEs and A-levels are important, but the younger years are where the work ethic, academic foundation and love of learning are established. They’re beginning to understand who they are, gain a sense of responsibility, confidence and how to approach challenges with good humour.” **L**