

Behind the Scenes at Ark Putney Academy: a parent's view

'Behind the Scenes at Ark Putney Academy' is a series of blog posts written by Sarah Sterne, a parent and governor at our school. Sarah writes from a parent's perspective about the challenges in selecting a Secondary School, getting past the jargon of new progress measures and finding the right learning community environment to suit a child's individual needs.



Sarah Sterne has a professional background in Education and Teacher Training. She is a parent of two children currently in Years 5 and 7 in the state education system. Since she has recently been through the process of selecting a secondary school and is about to embark on the process again; she is interested in sharing her experiences with others. Sarah has recently been appointed as a Governor of Ark Putney Academy.

Post 1: How to Choose a Secondary School

Make an informed choice!

Firstly, I'd like to sympathise because it can be difficult to get the information you need to make an informed choice. We cannot predict

the future but we want to be assured that we made the best possible choice that we have could given the information we had at the time. So how can you as a parent or guardian gather the right information to make the best possible choice for your child?

Make a short list:

Firstly, I recommend that you make a short list of local schools **whilst your child is in Year 5** and visit them. Many schools have official open days but others will allow you to visit if you make an appointment by telephone.

Don't forget to look in all the boroughs or Local Education Authorities around the one in which you live. London Boroughs are quite close together and the journey to a neighbouring borough may be easier than you thought.

During your first visit, you can gain much information that will help you to decide whether to keep the school on your list.

What to ask schools:

While you are visiting, think about these questions: Will your child be happy in this learning environment? What does your child struggle with and how can this school support them? Similarly, what are your child's strengths and how can this school extend them? Do the teachers communicate well with you? Are they willing to answer your questions? Do you feel comfortable and welcome in the school? Will your son or daughter be able to make friends in this school? How will they get to the school? What do the children typically attain in this school? What is the size of the school? How many pupils are there in each year group? How are the children rewarded for their hard work? Are the current pupils motivated? Does the ethos of the school 'fit' your family?

Critically, you will need to find out what the admissions criteria are for the school you are visiting and try to gauge what the chances are of your son or daughter being offered a place there.

What do the results mean?

You can also look at data which is publicly available. GCSE results are an indication of what the pupils achieved in the previous year 11. All schools publish the grades and you can compare one school against another but make sure you are comparing *like for like*. Some schools remove Mathematics and English from the list of subjects when they publish the results on their website, *putting the overall percentage up*. It is worth

looking also back a few years at the GCSE results to see if there is a rising trend, declining trend or if the results are generally stable.

What is Value-Added?

A much better indicator though of a school's performance is a measure known as '**value-added**'. Value-added takes account of the attainment level of the pupils when they started at the school in Year 7 compared to their final exit results (GCSEs). It is a measure of pupils' progress between primary and secondary school, not just their exam results. In my view, it tells you much more about the **quality of teaching and learning** in a school than the GCSE results alone can do. The Department for Education (1) has stated:

'The value added measure gives the best indication in these Tables of schools' overall effectiveness'.

Both GCSE results and Value-added results can be compared to national results, giving you an indication of how the school compares to other schools in UK.

There is a new measure of Value-added called **Progress 8** which some schools opted into last year (2014-15), a year before it became compulsory. Progress 8 compares pupils' results to other pupils with the same prior attainment (2), in other words with the same starting point. It is called Progress 8 because it looks at pupils' progress across 8 different qualifications, including Mathematics and English GCSE.

Ark Putney Academy

The Department for Education league tables were published online in January 2016. This was the first time that Progress 8 information was made available to the public. The pupils in Ark Putney Academy did particularly well, coming in the top 5% nationally for progress and adding value (3). This is an amazing accomplishment and I would like to know exactly what has been happening at APA for this amount of progress to have taken place.

I am going to be finding out how teaching and learning is delivered at APA and what other factors have contributed to the progress of the pupils. I will share what I have discovered with you in future blog posts.

References:

1. http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/archive/schools_05/sec4.shtml

2. Department for Education, Progress 8 measure in 2016, 2017 and 2018, January 2016, DFE – 00075-2015
3. Ark Putney Academy Newsletter Edition 51, 22-01-16