



No Brainer

An alliance of London girls' schools is planning to replace the 11+ with cognitive tests to make the admissions process less of a headache



LISA FREEDMAN

When my oldest child was sitting 11+, I used to wake up in the middle of the night and count school places. The activity certainly didn't send me back to sleep. Now, however, a significant tranche of London schools is planning to make their admissions process less nightmarish and, from 2019, will be simplifying their entrance exams.

The loose alliance of schools known as the North London Independent Girls' Schools' Consortium (12 all-girls' schools in the capital and surrounding suburbs)

have long tried to ease the pressure on pupils by coordinating their exams and the date on which results are released. Now, they intend to radically reorganise the exams themselves, replacing the traditional written papers in Maths and English with a single aptitude test, which, they hope, will be considerably less stressful.

"We've had discussions for the past few years to address concerns about young children's mental health, particularly girls," says Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of Consortium member Francis Holland School, Sloane Square. "Then, a number of prep-school heads gave a presentation to senior-school heads about the effects of 11+ testing with a plea to significantly modify or

get rid of it. In its place, they advocated the use of cognitive testing."

Cognitive tests – or, to use a more old-fashioned term, IQ tests – have, of course, long been a significant plank of school admissions. They were (and remain) the dominant means by which the country's 163 grammar schools discriminate amongst their multitude of applicants. Increasingly, however, they have also been employed by the independent sector. Eton, for example, introduced a bespoke computerised aptitude test as a key part of its admissions process in 2002, and this type of assessment has now become widespread in 13+ 'pre-testing', where applicants frequently sit online multiple-choice tests.

Lucy Elphinstone believes that one of the most significant benefits of cognitive testing is that it's less easy to tutor for, and, as a result, less likely to induce the same level of 'I-can't-do-it' panic. "Girls take similar tests every year at school to track and forecast progress and don't blink an eyelid."

A further plus is that cognitive tests are seen as fairer to those for whom English is an additional language and applicants from state primary schools, who may not have received the same level of preparation.

Independent schools are, of course, fortunate, that, unlike their grammar-school counterparts, they can employ cognitive tests as just one strand of a multi-faceted admissions process, using school reports and interviews to give a more in-depth picture, and the Consortium are currently ensuring that both these components are more robust.

Traditionally, decisions about who and how to interview have been left up to individual Consortium schools, with some interviewing all girls before the written tests, others interviewing all after, and many making an initial edit based on the outcome of the written exams.

Victoria Bingham, recently appointed head of Consortium member South Hampstead High School, which receives about 10 applicants per place, is hoping to continue the practice she's just introduced of providing one-to-one interviews for every applicant.

"The difference between candidate number 20 and candidate number 100 in the written papers is usually not that great. What we're looking for is spark and an interview can entirely reverse the order. A creative girl, full of character and intelligence, might not be particularly well suited to reasoning tests, while the child who's good at the tests may come across as a bit of an automaton."

The interview, evolving, aiming to assess personality and academic. High a co-educational north London school, several years, intellectual and listening skills. This approach Consortium.

"We're looking at activities like and critical thinking. I believe are relevant in a rapidly changing world," says Lucy Elphinstone.

The Consortium has aroused considerable interest elsewhere. Other schools like Wycombe Abbey are currently reviewing their processes. St Cheltenham already have the 11+ transition 'non-binding' for all applicants.

"We provide one-to-one assessments. Admissions take time, but we're looking to streamline the process."

The assessment is a minute chat of questions and creative writing. I proceed to sit



The interview process itself is also evolving, aiming to ascertain aspects of personality and ability beyond the merely academic. Highgate School, for example, a co-educational independent school in north London, introduced group interviews several years, intended to evaluate intellectual curiosity, problem solving, listening skills and the ability to collaborate. This approach is also being favoured by the Consortium.

"We're looking at far more group-based activities likely to suss out creativity and critical thinking, the skills we believe are required to thrive in a rapidly changing world," says Lucy Elphinstone.

The Consortium's move has aroused considerable interest elsewhere, and other schools, such as Wycombe Abbey, 'are currently reviewing their processes'. Some, such as Cheltenham Ladies' College, already have measures in place to smooth the 11+ transition, and here, a voluntary, 'non-binding' 'pre-assessment' is offered to all applicants in Year 5.

"We provide a one-and-a-half-hour one-to-one assessment," says Dr Hilary Laver, Admissions Director. "It's heavy on our time, but we feel it's incredibly valuable."

The assessment consists of a 15-20 minute chat and written samples of the type of questions in maths, verbal reasoning and creative writing girls will confront if they proceed to sit the entrance exam itself.



LEFT
South Hampstead High School pupils

RIGHT
SHHS girls on the sports pitch

BELOW
Lucy Elphinstone, Head of Francis Holland, Sloane Square

"The longer you have with them, the more you feel you can make the right judgement. We're looking at the pace they work and their accuracy, how they cope with the unfamiliar and how they respond to guidance."

At Cheltenham, the pre-assessment also provides the opportunity to talk to parents. "It enables us to understand their ambitions. We're honest with them and give them a sense of where their daughter will fall in the cohort."

In a system in which not every child can gain a place at their preferred school, parents will, understandably, feel anxious about their children's prospects, and Lucy Elphinstone feels this concern has been one of the chief drivers of the tutoring business.

"With the new tests, familiarity will certainly give greater confidence, but tutoring will not significantly affect the outcome. We hope common sense will prevail."

Leading tutorial companies, like Keystone Tutors, agree – up to a point. "The computerised cognitive tests currently used are purposefully designed with as little transparency as possible and no tutor can claim to have in-depth knowledge or experience of the tests themselves," says founder and director Will Orr-Ewing. "However, the cold hard facts are that the numeracy and literacy content of these tests is rooted in Key Stage 2 of the National Curriculum. As such, a comprehensive understanding of the Maths and English syllabus will stand students in good stead."

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Keystone also believe a well-honed exam technique can be of benefit. "Often questions may be testing something quite simple, but be presented in a complex way."

If, as the schools argue, tutoring isn't the answer, what is? "We feel the changes will give parents more of a role to play," says Lucy Elphinstone. "The best way to develop cognitive skills is for families to sit round a dinner table at night discussing the news; for girls to be taken to exhibitions, concerts, the theatre."

Ultimately, of course, a selective system will never be entirely stress free, but the Consortium schools and their counterparts elsewhere are all aiming for the same thing. As Dr Laver puts it: "What we hope is that girls will come to the exams in a relaxed state, so they have as much brain space as possible to focus on what's being asked." 17

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