

# Stress 'beyond boiling point' in race for private schools

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Competition for places at top independent schools is creating pressure that has gone "beyond boiling point", a leading prep school head has said.

While the number of prep schools has boomed, hardly any new private senior schools have opened, resulting in fevered competition for places and children sitting entrance exams at many different institutions.

Some of the more highly selective girls' schools have left a consortium system because they believe its shared test does not help them differentiate between the brightest children.

Thousands of children are taking exams this month for entry to senior schools in September, with some sitting multiple tests in English, maths, verbal and non-verbal reasoning at six or seven schools.

Prudence Lynch, headmistress of Kensington Prep, a girls' school in west London, said some parents "almost explode" from stress. She said: "The pressure is beyond boiling point now. Children, not out of greed but out of desperation, will be sitting six or seven separate schools' exams. Some are nearly a

day long. There are so many prep-school children and so many more prep schools and no new senior schools to speak of. There aren't enough places. The number sitting entrance exams for most of the senior schools has doubled — those that used to have 300 sitting the exam now have 600 or 700.

"We're having to try to prepare 10-year-olds to have sophisticated exam technique as well as knowing how to answer the questions, such as writing legibly, looking at the clock and dividing up the questions, not spending too long on a question that is worth only one mark, allowing time to review what you've done. It's not just about aptitude, it's about those tricks to go with the aptitude." Mrs Lynch said that more parents of primary children in the state

system were choosing to go private at secondary level, adding to numbers taking independent school entrance exams.

She added: "There are still, mercifully, some consortium groups. I understand why senior schools are doing their own tests, but it's getting so much worse for the children. I do have increasing concerns about their stress. We want to think of ways of tackling

it." At Latymer Upper School, in west London, 1,077 children were sitting the 11+ entrance exam this week, up from about 600 ten years ago. At Magdalen College School in Oxford, the number rose by about 40 per cent last year.

Francis Holland School in Chelsea had 230 registrations for the entrance exam in 2009 — by this year it had risen to 730. Lucy Elphinstone, the headmistress, said: "The only real solution is to build more schools. We are all looking for space. We have 10 applicants for every space in the senior school.

"We interview every candidate to try to get past the prepared, formulaic interview from children who have been rehearsed by parents or tutors. We try to do something surprising that will get past the prepped interview, but these are ten-year-old children and we want to make them feel comfortable, rather than do an Oxbridge-style interview that scares the daylights out of them. You often see a wonderful spark when they talk to you that you wouldn't get just from an exam paper."

Mrs Elphinstone said more schools were setting their own tests because of the pressure of differentiating between so many candidates. At a conference in London, she said: "There is very little innocence and freedom left for children ... pressure on places is becoming such that parents are beside themselves with anxiety to get their children into schools."

**Lucy Elphinstone says more schools are needed**

