



EDUCATING LONDON

The capital has some of the best state and private education in the world – but rising fees, rocketing house prices in tiny catchment areas and competitive parents mean the battle for school places has reached fever pitch. By **Tim Auld**

Photography by Rebecca Pierce

T

he good news for Londoners wanting a top-notch education for their children is that the city boasts some of the best schools – independent, grammar and state – in the world.

The bad news is that it's harder than ever to be offered a place at them. Head teachers of independent schools such as St Paul's School and Francis Holland School (Sloane Square) report that applicants have nearly doubled in the past five to six years, and a leading non-fee-paying grammar school such as The Henrietta Barnett School reports that it now has 20 applicants competing for each place.

And if the academic criteria don't stymie you, the money very well might. Recent research by the wealth management firm Killik & Co revealed that private school fees have increased by roughly four times the rate of inflation since 1990, edging out the 'squeezed middle' professionals who might previously have entertained thoughts of educating their children privately and >>>



PULLING POWER Above: Living in the catchment area for Lowther Primary School in Barnes can add up to £500 per sq ft to the value of a property there. Right: Girls busy at work at the independent Francis Holland School, Sloane Square



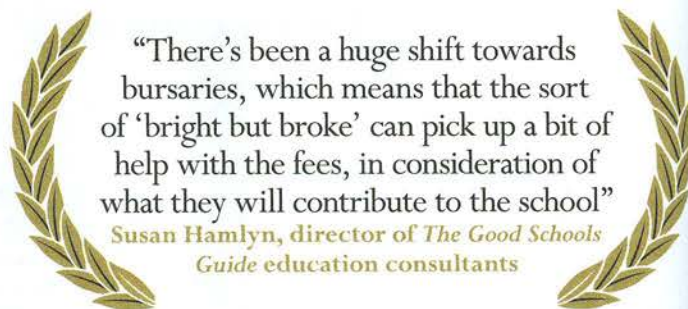
threatening to turn independent schools into the preserve of the super-rich.

It has been argued that independent schools only have themselves to blame for pricing the middle-classes out of the market by spending vast sums on state-of-the-art facilities such as new performing arts centres to woo super-rich parents.

Professor Mark Bailey, head of St Paul's (£7,827 a term), says that the question of the 'facilities race' has been overblown. "It's an easy headline that the global elite are

funding these fantastic facilities," he says. The reality, he believes, is much more nuanced. He cites rising costs across a number of areas – HR, health and safety. But most of all it's the cost of securing top-class staff: "We are looking to compete with other employers in the graduate market for increasingly scarce mathematicians, physicists and chemists and so on. For us, subject knowledge is king or queen rather than classroom craft."

Prof Bailey made headlines this year when he announced that boys with parents on a combined salary of £120,000 would now be considered for bursaries. "The part bursaries are being offered in a far more generous way," he goes on to explain. "You will be looking eventually at [families earning] £150,000, £170,000,



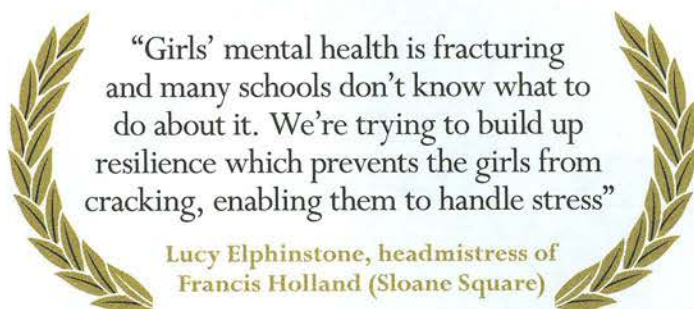
£190,000 potentially benefiting."

The problem is similarly vexed for parents looking to send their child to one of the increasing number of the capital's highly rated state schools. In the past year, in areas including Kensington and Chelsea, Hammersmith and Fulham, five per cent of pupils weren't given a place at any of their three preferred options. But all over

London, house prices in catchment areas of good schools are rising at a rate that will soon exclude all but the wealthiest. Once a school receives a rating of outstanding from Ofsted, an area can be transformed as eager middle-class parents buy up housing stock in the catchment.

So what is driving this sharp increase in demand for London day schools? Lucy Elphinstone, head of Francis Holland (Sloane Square) cites the mini baby-boom of 2006. "Ten years ago there was a [population] explosion, for whatever reason. And ten years on these children are now trying to get into senior school and there are just not enough places."

Susan Hamlyn, a former teacher and director of *The Good*



Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of Francis Holland (Sloane Square)



Schools Guide education consultants believes it is also down to an influx of wealthy international Londoners. "I've been working on *The Good Schools Guide* for the past 16 years. The changes have been phenomenal with the arrival of Russians, Chinese and people from the Middle East as well as emerging countries such as Kazakhstan. Now we're finding people coming from South America, we're getting Brazilians and Argentinians and also Mexicans. I get people ringing me from South Africa and saying, 'If my son gets into St Paul's, we will move over to London'."

The sheer weight of numbers competing for places has turned the capital into a pressure cooker and, ultimately, it's the young who are suffering because of their

parents' expectations. "The [current situation] is fuelling desperation among parents which is having a detrimental effect on children's mental health," Elphinstone tells me.

I have first-hand experience of this having put my daughter through the 11-plus in January this year. We applied to seven independent schools in London and the suburbs, having been

warned by her teachers that she would struggle to win a place at her preferred school. It now seems like child cruelty, but back in January things had reached fever pitch at home. While we struggled to persuade her to do any work at all over the Christmas holiday, we heard of children in her class putting in three hours of practice papers a day. From a parent at another school I heard that one young girl facing exams had developed anorexia, another had started to wet herself.

It takes a brave teacher to confront the runaway train that tutoring has become. All the schools we applied to told us they could see through tutoring, but experience shows that tutored children nevertheless are awarded the places at the top of the league schools. Adam Pettitt, head of Highgate School, has brought some sanity to the table. "Tutoring is an indication of the frenzy or the madness..." he has said. "There are a proportion of parents at my school who are bonkers and understanding what parents are like is very important. When we come across somebody who is a bit frenetic, we do talk to them." Elphinstone is also

SCHOOL FEES PER TERM

£8,092

(boarding £11,686)
Westminster

£7,827

(boarding £11,723)
St Paul's School

£7,306

St Paul's
Girls' School

£6,800

King's College School
Wimbledon

£6,530

Highgate School

£6,390

Francis Holland SW1

£6,169

North London Collegiate

£6,141

University College School

£6,130

Francis Holland NW1

£5,860

Channing School

£5,352

City of London
School for Girls

£4,962

City of London
School for Boys

£3,757

Lycée Français

"The fees mean that we are increasingly unaffordable. It was our founder's vision [to educate] boys indifferently of their background and we've drifted some way from that"

Professor Mark Bailey, head
of St Paul's School



SCHOOL'S OUT Clockwise from above: Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of Francis Holland School, Sloane Square; boys from St Paul's School enjoy the benefits of a school by the river; The Henrietta Barnett School in Hampstead

"Tutoring for entrance exams is not necessary and pushing children beyond what is good for them is detrimental to their wellbeing and counterproductive"

Del Cooke, headteacher of The Henrietta Barnett School

concerned. "Tutoring, which is a very lucrative industry, is burgeoning in London," she says. "In some instances tutoring is helpful and important. But parents feel under pressure to have a tutor – first to ensure a senior school place and second, sadly, because it is a sort of social

success story. After the nanny and the housekeeper comes another member of the household staff: the tutor."

Indeed, my experience of visiting schools, hearing head teachers speak and meeting the young pupils over the past year, has made plain to me that it is not

What the agents say

How much do good schools influence sales?

LIZA-JANE KELLY, SALES DIRECTOR MARSH & PARSONS

"The educational system in London is one of the many reasons people want to come to this city from abroad. But there are a limited number of places and there are a limited



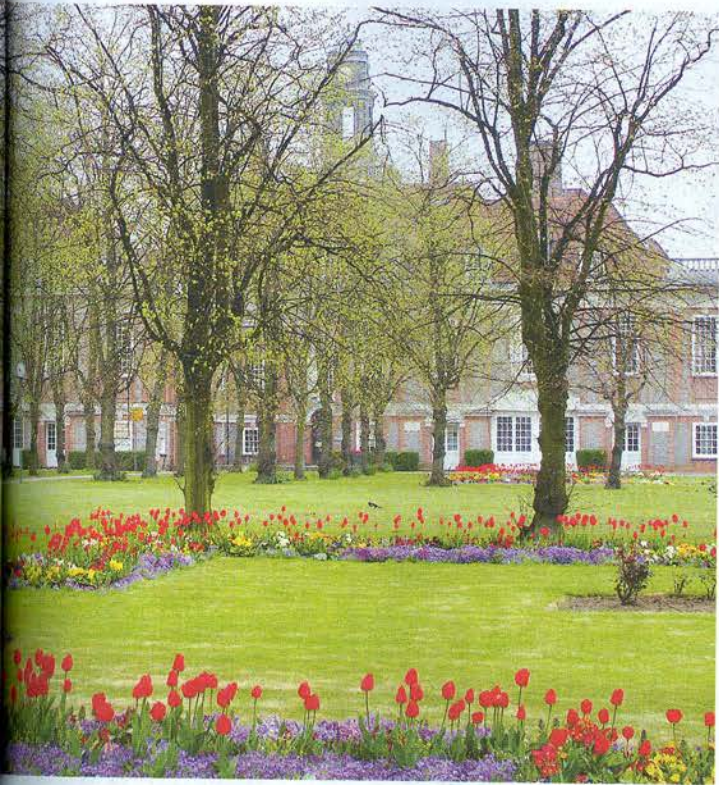
number of schools. **Barnes Primary School** is rated outstanding and its catchment area is tiny. We have just sold a two-bedroom cottage there for £1.1m. We also sold a house right opposite **Lowther Primary School** for £1.475m, which is about £400 to £500 per sq ft above the average

selling price in that part of Barnes. Battersea has very popular state schools too. **Honeywell** and **Belleville** are both very popular and people will do all they can to get their kids into one of those two."

MARK POLLACK, DIRECTOR ASTON CHASE
"I think one of the attractions of north west London to a lot of domestic and international buyers is



that there is such a large number of highly regarded schools in the area. In Hampstead Garden Suburb for example a state primary such as **Brookland Junior School** is a driving force behind people moving to the area in order to be eligible for that school. The premium on a house within a state school catchment area can be up to 15 per cent. It's great to be in the catchment area for a popular school but be careful not to be too



TOP TEN EMERGING SCHOOLS

from *The Good Schools Guide*

STATE

Charter School, Dulwich
Admissions by distance;
co-ed

Parliament Hill School
Admissions by distance;
girls only

Alexandra Park School
Admissions by distance;
co-ed

Marylebone Boys' School
Admissions by fair
banding; priority to boys
at Westminster primary
schools then by distance

**Sacred Heart High
School, Hammersmith**
Priority to practising

Catholics attending
feeder primary
schools; girls only

INDEPENDENT
Forest, Snaresbrook
co-ed, 4-18

Eltham College
boys, 7-18

**Kingston Grammar
School**
co-ed, 11-18

**Merchant Taylors'
School, Northwood**
boys, 3-18

**Notting Hill and
Ealing High School**
girls, 4-18

the schools stoking the fires of anxiety, but we parents, determined that our children must get ahead at all costs. Vivienne Durham, former head of Francis Holland (Regent's Park) and now head of schools advisory at Enjoy Education, says "I would quite often meet a child in January at an interview who would have been to about 12 interviews before she met me. I mean, how that child was still vertical, I don't know."

Susan Hamlyn tells me the story of being "confronted by a couple of Russians who came on behalf of their employer with a suitcase of money". When it

"It's not just that there are simply more people in the pool looking for places for their children; the other thing is the sheer anxiety. Anxiety breeds anxiety"
Vivienne Durham, former head of Francis Holland (Regent's Park) and now head of schools advisory at Enjoy Education

comes to trying to get a place at a leading state school some parents are prepared to risk prosecution. "I've actually known people who have bought a flat that's very clearly in the catchment area of the school they want their child to go to and then pretended to live there," says Hamlyn. "We tell

people not to do it a, because it's illegal and b, because it's immoral."

Meanwhile, in 2013 the Sutton Trust reported that one in ten middle-class parents had exaggerated or lied about their faith to secure a place at a religious-based comprehensive.

London's grammar schools

excite similar irrationality. Hamlyn recalls talking to parents from Birmingham who called her to ask if there was any reason why their child couldn't apply to The Henrietta Barnett School – the plan was for the child to commute, if the application was successful, from Birmingham to Hampstead Garden Suburb until the family could relocate to north London.

Such is the hunger for a London education. If you want it for your child, you'll either need to hold your nerve and be true to yourself, or you can simply join the madness, because whatever you're doing to help your child you can guarantee someone else is doing it tenfold. ■

close, as that can actually have an adverse impact on the value of your property. Yes, get well within the catchment area but not on top of the school."

**ANDREW LANGTON,
CHAIRMAN
AYLESFORD
INTERNATIONAL**

"Competition is being driven by a large influx of international clients seeking to benefit from London's strong education system and people



saying "if we can live within the catchment area of **Bousfield Primary School** [which is 0.19 miles], for example, we will pay a premium in order to achieve that'. Education is rather like health, it overrides everything. If you have a £4m house in Fulham today, I predict that the owners will cash in the £4m, put £1m in the bank for education and will move to Oxfordshire, from which the husband will have to commute."

**JAMES FORBES,
PARTNER
STRUTT & PARKER**

"A lot of buyers come to us from other parts of the UK and from abroad who want to relocate to London. Schooling is, if not the most, then one of the most important points. A lot of people also relocate within London, for example they have bought a big house in Hampstead or Regent's Park and then they decide they



want to move within London to be nearer certain schools. International buyers often instruct us that they want to be within ten or 15 minutes walk maximum of their chosen school. Because of where I'm located people here just tend to look at private schools, such as **Knightsbridge School, Garden House and Francis Holland (Sloane Square)**."