

Private schools find ‘tutor-proof’ selection test

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Bingham: tutoring industry is pernicious and unhealthy for children
SOUTH HAMPSTEAD HIGH SCHOOL

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A government minister called it the “holy grail” of selective education. Now a group of head teachers may have found it — by coming up with a “tutor-proof” test and interview to select girls for top private schools.

Girls applying to the 12 schools that make up the North London Girls’ Schools Consortium are sitting admission tests and interviews this month. The group has agreed to replace 11-plus exams in maths and English with a one-hour “cognitive ability” test and interviews based on “what if”-style questions.

The move by the schools — including Godolphin & Latymer, South Hampstead High and St James Senior Girls’ School — follows concern about an “arms race” and “dreadful prepping” as middle-class families try to get a place at an elite school.



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Head teachers say private tutoring, at up to £75 an hour for up to six years, puts pressure on children and can harm mental health. The new tests will also help girls from poorer families who apply from state primary schools.

Victoria Bingham, headmistress of South Hampstead High School, said: “The tutoring industry is pernicious because it encourages a culture of marginal gains and perfectionism that is unhealthy for young kids. Childhood is over-strategised now; children’s lives are over-scheduled . . . Children need free time to play, to dream and to be bored.”

Bingham said some prep schools and tutors coached children even for interviews. The new interviews this month have “what if” questions that cannot be predicted. She refused to give examples, saying that would defeat the object. The cognitive ability tests start next year.

Ben Thomas, former headmaster of Thomas's, Battersea, where Prince George is a pupil, has also decried the practice of tutoring children for school admission. Thomas said it was “a hideous concept” because it stole childhoods.

How reliable the tests are remains to be seen. Bingham said she had done a “secret shopper” investigation, posing as a anxious parent and calling tutoring agencies to ask if they could help with the consortium's new tests.

“One was honest and said it was not worth tutoring for them, but some companies claimed they had absolutely cracked these sorts of tests. When I delved deeper, however, none were able to give me any kind of data. Their evidence for success is all anecdotal because it is an unregulated industry.”

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