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Presenting entry-level opportunities

◆ Open days are an ideal way to learn about how an independent school can tailor a high-quality education for your child, writes Rosemary Gallagher

Scotland has a strong tradition of offering high-quality and well-rounded education at its independent schools across the country. And when it comes to choosing the best option for your family, open days can be a vital resource to get a real feel for a school and its ethos.

Another excellent source of information is the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS). Its figures show there are around 70 independent schools in Scotland. They collectively educate more than 28,000 pupils and employ some 7,000 staff across Scotland. Schools provide millions of pounds each year in fee assistance, with almost a quarter of all pupils receiving some form of assistance.

A report published for SCIS on the impact of the Scottish independent school sector in February last year by Biggar Economics revealed that it contributes £0.5 billion each year to the Scottish economy. The analysis also found that independent schools support almost 12,000 jobs in Scotland and bring in £38 million in international exports.

Focusing on the importance of open days, independent schools stress the value of families visiting their sites and meeting teachers and other staff.

A spokesperson for St George's School in Edinburgh says: "A school is more than a place of learning, it is a community where pupils and staff connect, where

values are lived, and where a unique culture shapes daily life. Every school and child is unique – the best way to know if a school is the right fit is to experience it firsthand. "An open day at St George's offers the chance to meet staff and pupils, see learning in action, and explore our campus. The result is a community that inspires girls to be confident, resilient, academic, creative, with a well-rounded education."

The y say choosing the right school is a significant decision, both personally and financially, and open events give families the opportunity to experience a school for themselves.

The spokesperson adds that each St George's event – from its autumn Open Day, where parents can tour the school with pupils, hear from the head, and explore teaching departments, to its School in Action days, which offer a snapshot of daily life – provides valuable insight. The school also hosts free Come and Play sessions for toddlers, alongside musical performances, plays, and sports events open to families.

Jonathan Anderson, headteacher at Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh, says: "Open days are a crucial opportunity for our school to showcase our educational philosophy, facilities, and learning environment. We believe in transparency and want to provide prospective families with an authentic, immersive experience of our school

community. These events allow us to demonstrate our commitment to holistic education, academic excellence, and personal development beyond the traditional classroom setting."

He explains that parents gain a firsthand insight into the school's culture and ethos during open days. They have the chance to meet current teachers and leadership staff directly. Visiting allows them to observe classroom dynamics and teaching approaches. And parents can get a thorough understanding of the school's academic and pastoral support systems.

They can also assess the facilities and resources available, and have the invaluable opportunity to ask detailed questions about curriculum, extracurricular activities, and student support.

"Children experience the school environment



directly during open days" says Anderson. "They get a genuine sense of potential new learning spaces. Meeting current students helps them feel more comfortable about a potential transition; [they] can understand the school's atmosphere and community spirit. They have the opportunity to explore facilities like science labs, sports halls, art studios, and libraries. The experience helps children feel more empowered in the school selection process."

Mark Mortimer, warden of Glenalmond College, says its open days give parents the opportunity to see, experience and feel as much of the school and its activities and to meet as many pupils and parents as possible in a short space of time. Families get a sense of what goes on and can see, hear and feel what the school is about.

"There are lots of people on hand to talk to, whether that is pupils, staff or other like-minded visitors. Open days are sometimes accused of being artificial, but they

Families are invited to step inside St Aloysius' College for a tour or taster day to see what the Glasgow school can offer

provide a condensed and thus beneficial snapshot of the life of a school," he adds.

The St George's representative states that the school wants visitors to explore beyond the classroom during an open day visit and discover the full breadth of opportunities available.

"Ask us about our personalised learning approach, diverse co-curricular activities, leadership programmes, and dedicated pastoral care – each designed to develop individuality and ambitions."

"Ask how we create a seamless and welcoming transition for new pupils, encouraging a strong sense of belonging from their very first day. Ask how our broad and enriched curriculum integrates academic excellence with co-curricular experiences, offering performances,

◆ Selected school open day dates for your diary

FAIRVIEW INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL
Thursday, 27 February, 3pm to 6.30pm

GLENALMOND COLLEGE
From 9.30am on Saturday, 22 March

LORETTO SCHOOL
Junior School Open Afternoon, Friday, 28 February, 1.30pm to 3pm; Senior School Open Morning, Saturday, 22 February, 10am to 12.30pm

MERCHISTON CASTLE SCHOOL
Spring Open Morning, Saturday, 8 March, 9.30am-11.30am, Discovery Day, aimed at entry into P6, P7 and S1, Friday, 21 March

ST ALOYSIUS' COLLEGE
To book a personalised tour or taster day for this selective Jesuit day school, email admissions@staloyusius.org or alternatively telephone 0141-332 3190

ST GEORGE'S SCHOOL
School in Action' day Friday, 14 March, 9.30am to 12 noon.

ST MARY'S MUSIC SCHOOL
Be a Chorister Afternoon Friday, 28 February; Instrumental Taster Day, Sunday, 9 March; Virtual Open Morning, Sunday, 9 March; Vocal Taster Day, Sunday, 16 March

THE COMPASS SCHOOL
Saturday, 8 March, 10am to 12.30pm

precisely you are looking for during your visit. We all have our educational philosophy and our own views on what makes a good school. These opinions will help dictate what you are looking for and what you then want to find out – it's different for everyone."

He encourages people to ask about the school's purpose; try not to be seduced by facilities – important as they are – but focus on people and relationships. A practical piece of guidance from Mortimer is to ask about the food, as it's one of the most important aspects of boarding school life.

He concludes: "Trust your instincts – the 'feel' of a school is very important and hard to 'fake'. Is it a genuine, warm, welcoming, and friendly community? All schools claim they are, but does it come across during your visit? Ask how the school gets the best out of every child."

What do individual schools see as their unique selling point, that would encourage families to choose their establishment over another?

St George's School says its warmth, expertise and personalised approach builds ambitious, fearless young

“ Open days provide a condensed and thus beneficial snapshot of the life of a school

women with personality. It describes itself as a place of possibilities where everyone is clearly heard, pupils feel empowered to be themselves, and innovation is constantly encouraged.

Talking about Merchiston, Anderson explains: "At our school, we don't just educate students – we inspire future leaders, innovators, and compassionate global citizens. Our USP lies in our holistic approach that balances rigorous academic excellence with comprehensive personal development. We pride ourselves on delivering an education that transforms young minds."

Summing up Glenalmond, Mortimer concludes: "Our true boarding school experience – a warm close-knit community – adds to what sets us apart. We are preparing our pupils for success in the next stage of their lives – to go out and make a difference in the world."

On the following pages you can read about the impact of VAT being applied to school fees. *The Scotsman's* education correspondent, Calum Ross, provides a report examining the reaction north of the Border to the imposition of the tax at the standard rate of 20 per cent on education and boarding services provided by private schools.

We also look at the implications of the new levy for the future of all-girls establishments.

Also in this supplement, we explore how artificial intelligence (AI) is being used by independent schools, and consult the views of head teachers.

While AI has its limitations and is being treated with caution, schools are adopting it in various ways – to encourage creativity, rather than replace it.

“ Every school and child is unique – the best way to know if a school is the right fit is to experience it firsthand