

# What The Good Schools Guide says

## Head

Since 2022 Ellie Grunewald MA PGCE, previously head of Connaught House School. A Londoner by upbringing, Ms Grunewald ventured north to Liverpool for her first degree in history, psychology and philosophy but returned to London for her PGCE (Kingston) and subsequent career, which includes over a decade at North Bridge House Prep as head of English, religious education and form teacher for years 5-8.

Her teaching has gone hand in hand with a growing interest in children's wellbeing at school. She has a master's in counselling aspects of education from the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, and these skills were apparent on our visit: 'If a child is struggling or misbehaving, I might sit them down on the floor in my office and breathe with them,' she told us. 'That said, I am quite traditional with behaviour expectations, children need and like to have boundaries.' Parents approve: 'Ellie is very calm, she has a lovely manner about her.'

In her spare time, you'll probably find her practising yoga and or learning the piano. Also loves taking advantage of the longer holidays for distant travel, including having volunteered several times for a charity working in East Africa and travelling to Uganda twice to train teachers.

## Entrance

Non-selective but highly sought after, so waste no time in getting your child's name down for a nursery place – and yes, that might mean before they are born. A non-refundable deposit is required for a spot on the waiting list, with offers made in date order of registration, although there is often movement due to plans changing.

Nursery children gain automatic entry into reception although parents must reconfirm the place or risk losing their spot – one overlooked this to their detriment but, reassuringly, a place was quickly found. Any spare spots are then allocated to newcomers on a first come, first served basis. Siblings get preference but their entry is not a given. As pupils can now remain at the upper school until year 6 (first year 4 cohort from September 2023), it's worth asking about occasional places higher up.

Joiners from year 1 spend some time in the classroom to ensure they can access, and keep up with, the pace of the curriculum. Current school report also requested.

## Exit

In the past, children had to leave after year 2 so were prepped for and undertook 7+ exams with the most frequented destinations being the Cavendish School, St Paul's Cathedral School, North Bridge House Prep and Forest School. Secondary school destinations are expected to be of a similar academic calibre to those at 7+, albeit a more expansive list owing to more schools having an 11+ entry point.

## Our view

Independent prep schools in this part of London are few and far between, with many Islington families travelling to Hampstead, Highgate or into the City in their search for

decent private education. This was one of the main reasons prompting a group of parents to form their own early years offering back in 1973. What started in the front room of one of their houses expanded into a nursery in a local church, before moving to its current site in a former Hindu temple just off Essex Road. It's a short hop from excellent train and bus routes, making it a convenient choice for Hackney, Highbury and Islington dwellers working in the City, Shoreditch and also Westminster.

Children start the term-time nursery the term after turning age 2-and-a-half. Core hours are in line with the school day (8.45am-3pm) and although there's no wraparound care, a breakfast club runs from 8am and older pre-reception children can also attend after school clubs, including pottery and dance and movement, until 4.30pm. These youngest children have the run of the lower ground and access to all kinds of dress up and role play equipment for a mix of child and adult led activities, including learning Ghanaian nursery rhymes with a native-speaking teaching assistant with great success.

Older pre-reception children are housed upstairs in a light, airy and high-ceilinged space that must feel like playtime heaven to a small child. We observed children playing with mint and rosemary flavoured dough and others getting wonderfully sticky with oranges and lemons at a 'juice exploration station'. Two class groups run concurrently with children split by age. The curriculum is topic-based but 'we take into account their voice and interests,' explained one teacher while prepping coronation crown biscuits for the oven.

Although lacking outdoor space (as most nurseries do in this part of town) a new indoor-outdoor free-flow play space is planned and all children are taken for daily walks to the many surrounding parks or on mini-trips to a local shop for example. Pre-reception children head to the upper school on the minibus for PE and weekly sessions that ramp up in the summer term before they move up. From 2025, reception will be based at the nursery, making the building fully dedicated to early years.

The upper school opened in 2005 and is situated a brisk 10-15 minute walk north of the nursery in a less-travelled enclave of Islington. Once the infant school of St Jude and St Paul's Church, it has a distinct village-y feel. Every morning the majority of children arrive on foot, by bike or scooter as most families live no more than a mile-and-a-half away within Islington or Hackney boroughs.

On the day of our visit, breakfast club children were eagerly inspecting tadpoles in the classroom. 'Some have legs!' they shrieked excitedly, before heading out into the playground to do handstands or help set up playground equipment for the day ahead. There's a relaxed, friendly atmosphere right from drop-off, helped by the head chatting to everyone as they arrive. One parent told us, 'At all times you can walk into an office or classroom, and the teachers are immediately available and keen to talk to you.' Parents speak of good relationships between each other too - one quipped, 'People are quietly successful, there are no billionaires or talk of cars here!' No-one would deny the school does have its share of demanding parents, however, and one parent confided, 'There are a few alpha mums that scare me!'

Space on the upper school site is tight. Classrooms are set around a compact, but recently enhanced, outdoor courtyard. A playhouse is regularly transformed and was a regal throne

room on our visit in advance of a coronation party. 'My favourite thing is the football pitch,' one child told us - which although tiny, has gone down a treat since its installation and is used for dodgeball, basketball, hockey and agility courses. Staff employ clever timetabling to give all classes ample outdoor time, and there are some competitive matches, albeit in their infancy and only in football so far. PE and swimming sessions happen at leisure facilities off-site, and local outdoor spaces including the King Henry's adventure playground are also utilised, as is the school's allotment where learning is enhanced through growing seeds and vegetables.

Although small in number, classrooms are surprisingly large. Heavily adorned walls showcase work including replicas of Adele Block Bauer in *The Woman in Gold* and Picasso's *Sunflowers*. The staff's skills are extensive - there are some incredibly artistic teachers and a TA who is a trained puppeteer. 'It's playful and magical for the kids,' parents told us. ICT lessons using Chromebooks are a highlight of the pupils' week and visiting music teachers come in for lively weekly sessions across all year groups, including nursery. All children are taught the violin in years 1 and 2 - 'It's a bit hard,' lamented some of the children, and many don't continue, but piano, cello, singing and guitar are also on offer. We watched an expressive and immersive dance class - again taught weekly, and by a West End dancer, no less. Drama not on curriculum but those attending the speech and drama club recently took LAMDA exams for the first time.

Learning is thematic and cross-curricular, with topics studied in one subject regularly spilling over into others to broaden the children's understanding eg creating Tudor houses in art to reinforce the history lessons. Our chatty tour guides had both previously been at a well-regarded local state primary but were horrified that 'they didn't give us any homework!' They seem relieved get their fill here, with regular work set to do at home. All the usual methods and tools are employed with 11+ in mind - a pile of Schofield and Sims workbooks was spotted ready for marking. The list of children's favourite subjects and activities is long: music, coding, literacy, art and... 'Does playtime count?' asked one child cheekily! Spanish is taught by a native speaker from the off but is met with mixed reviews from the children.

Around seven per cent (well below the national average) of pupils are on the SEN register. School can cater for mild neurodiverse tendencies, with some one-to-ones available (included in fees). The SENCo - notably, also the school's mental health lead - is 'outstanding' and 'a fantastic addition,' according to parents.

Prizes incentivise everything from good behaviour to neat handwriting. 'We reward attitudes such as resilience and curiosity, not just output,' the head added. We found the children to be very much at ease talking to staff, whom they address on first name terms. 'The teachers are really kind and help with anything we might struggle with,' one child shared. Small pupil numbers mean staff are quick to spot if there is an issue and act upon it, and there is a worry box for pupils to post any concerns.

Lunch is brought from home or parents can pre-order from a packed lunch supplier. 'They have fancy names for food', one child told us as she munched on her healthy selection in the gleaming, recently refurbished hall. This is also where dance lessons are held, along with after-school clubs. Children can take part in everything from Zumba to fencing Monday to Thursday. Regulation uniform is basic, with only the school fleece and sweater having to be

branded. No itchy blazers or fussy hats feature here, comfort and practicality reign.

Given that the school was established by parents, it's no surprise there's an active parents' committee. On top of the usual charitable events - quizzes, fairs and auctions etc - the PTA is also a funnel for feedback to the senior leadership team and governing committee, with which it is highly engaged.

Not long before our last visit, the school had had an ISI compliance inspection which resulted in the raising of several action points regarding procedural, governance and administrative matters. The shortcomings, some of which came about through the move from Ofsted to ISI inspections, are being addressed with the utmost urgency, according to the school, which parents say has been fully transparent in sharing findings and all details – including on its website. A reinspection is expected in the autumn term 2023.

### **Money matters**

School offers a small number of full and partial bursaries and is actively encouraging applications. It also participates in the nursery education grant scheme for children between 3 and 5 years old.

### **The last word**

A small city school hidden away from the bustle of Islington, and with ambitious expansion plans to accommodate older children and successfully prepare them for the fiercely competitive London day schools. It won't suit those wanting a big name school but what it lacks in space and on-site facilities, it makes up for through caring staff and a strong sense of community. Most schools claim that children are at the centre of everything they do but here, it is evident.