

The Telegraph

Parents are choosing smaller prep schools

Parents looking for a more inclusive education for their child are opting for smaller prep schools, finds Katie Hughes



Give it some welly: pupils at Dorset House in West Sussex enjoy the outdoors; the school has grown by 12 per cent in 2011 Photo: ALI KITTERMASTER

By Katie Hughes

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There's not a trace of Hogwarts about Belhaven Hill, a small boarding prep school on the East Lothian coast, which is exactly the way headmaster Innes MacAskill likes it. The house itself looks and feels like a large family home, and at weekends MacAskill and his wife, Sandy, take a bunch of boarders down to the local supermarket to buy ingredients for the "come dine with the headmaster" contest.

The traditional values and homely atmospheres of small prep schools such as Belhaven seem to appeal to the post-credit crisis generation of parents. While the recession has prompted a fall in pupil numbers across the independent sector as a whole, Belhaven has grown by 5 per cent over the past year – to a grand total of 118 pupils. Figures from the Independent Schools Council show that almost 75 per cent of its 154 small prep schools are either maintaining their numbers or expanding.

In terms of fees, the ISC's small prep schools (with a maximum of close to 150 pupils) are cheaper than their larger counterparts. Average day pupil fees at an ISC small prep school total just over £2,700 per term compared to £3,464 at a larger ISC prep school (with an average of just under 300 pupils). But

according to Henry Knight, headmaster of Woodcote House School in Surrey, which has 100 pupils, parents feel they're getting even more value for money from the individually tailored approach offered by smaller prep schools, than from the one-size-fits-all style of larger establishments. His school has grown by more than 10 per cent in two years. "We know every boy, and understand exactly what it is that makes them tick," he says.

Marcus Peel, who heads Malsis School in Yorkshire, which has 120 pupils and is maintaining numbers, believes that smaller prep schools offer more opportunities for pupils to participate. "In a small community such as ours everybody is somebody," he says. "There are boys in our 1st XV who would never get near a first team in a bigger prep school and it's the same for musicals and theatrical events."

Mark Pyper, until recently headmaster of Gordonstoun in Moray, Scotland and himself an alumnus of a small prep school, observes that the quality of individual pastoral care is generally better at smaller, more intimate schools. "The experience of personal development in a family-type environment is something which the small prep school is uniquely placed to offer," he says.

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But if you want your child to go to a top ranking senior school, should you not be considering a larger, high-flying prep school? Richard Brown, headmaster of Dorset House, prep school in West Sussex, whose pupils go on to, among others, Winchester, Harrow and Wellington, insists that size has little impact on the quality of education. "There is no lack of rigour in a small school," he says. "Results can be attained much more effectively when children are happy. It is about inclusivity, partnership and preparing children for today's challenges – not wrapping them in cotton wool."

Leadership is an intrinsic part of life in a small prep school, according to Knight, and this sets pupils up for the rough and tumble of senior school. "Everyone will be given the chance to lead at some level," he says. "Not just as prefects and sports captains but also as tuck, chapel and dormitory monitors." At Hanford School, a full-boarding establishment for 100 girls in rural Dorset, there are four committees of sixth formers who carry out roles around the school and look after homesick juniors. Barnaby Lenon, headmaster of Harrow School in North West London, notes that smaller schools instil a sense of duty and self-confidence: "We find that boys from small schools have an ingrained confidence and sense of responsibility which comes from having had leadership roles at prep school," he says.

The down side of a smaller prep school is usually the facilities – or lack of them. There's a good chance the sports centre and theatre will be less sophisticated than at a larger prep school. But Richard Brown, whose school has grown by 12 per cent this year to 144 pupils, believes the smaller schools make up for this by offering an "authentic" childhood experience instead. "Small prep schools provide an antidote to a world where children grow up too quickly," he says.

Malsis School is dotted with dens, with trees to climb and a stream to dam, while Hanford School has ponies, dogs, cats, chickens and large kitchen gardens. In summer children are taken riding through the countryside by "galloping matrons" before jumping into a (chilly) outdoor swimming pool.

Tom Dawson, headmaster of the 100-place Sunningdale School in Berkshire, which featured in a BBC Two documentary last autumn and has grown by 10 per cent this year, believes that flashy facilities can be a red herring. "If parents want a £5 million sports hall and a 50 metre pool, bedrooms with en suite facilities and plasma screens then they will go to a big school which can offer all that," he says. "But if they want a school where every member of staff really knows all the children, where there is a real family atmosphere, where they won't be lost in a crowd, then they will choose a small school."

[Independent Schools Council \(http://www.isc.co.uk\)](http://www.isc.co.uk)

[Independent Association of Prep Schools \(http://www.iaps.org.uk\)](http://www.iaps.org.uk)

Read comments about schools online at the [Good Schools Guide \(http://www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk\)](http://www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk)

Inspection reports can be found on school websites. Only take a child to visit schools you are sure about yourself

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