

Amanda Perry, How to Choose a State Secondary School, Oleander Press, £9.95

You start to wonder whether parents in Finland – sometimes held up as the world’s best education system – ever buy books like this. Do they need advice on categories of schools, the intricacies of performance tables, the ever-changing inspection system, and how to interpret the dark subtexts of open evenings? Or do they, with charming old-fangledness, send their children to the neighbourhood school, in the knowledge that the quality of education is good?

Nothing’s so simple over here where the section in Miranda Perry’s chapter on league tables alone runs to 25 pages. All the technical terms are explained here, reminding us what a cornucopia of apparent choice the English state school sector has become. There are faith schools, middle schools, mixed sex schools, extended schools, specialist schools, feeder schools, grammar schools and academies. It’s like being a child wandering wide-eyed past the Woolworths Pick ‘n Mix counter. Which to choose, which to choose?

Amanda Perry is full of eminently sensible advice. After a lengthy description of how the performance tables work, she tips off savvy parents about the way some schools play the system using the “tactic” (as she calls it) of using GNVQ qualifications to boost their A\*-C ratings. Touche.

She gives advice on what to look out for at school open evenings, placing heavy emphasis on the impression given by the headteacher: “If the head is inspirational, that is a very good sign”. (Note to self: be inspirational at next week’s Open Evening). She slips parents the question that will reveal how good a headteacher really is. Don’t ask about bullying because you’ll get a pre-packaged answer. No, ask: “How long does it take to mend a broken window at this school?” This will put the head off-guard, show whether s/he takes pride in the school, and reveal whether there is attention to detail.

There’s even a section on interpreting the logos on school stationery. For this task be prepared to set aside several hours: some schools have more badges than a middle-aged boy scout.

This is a book which does exactly what the title says. It’s packed with questions, hints, glossaries and checklists. It’s comprehensive, inoffensive, and well-written, a bit like a superior revision guide.

It just feels a little sad that choosing a school has such a sensation of sweating and fretting over final exams, with the underlying risk of turning up to find that the exam hall is already full.

Geoff Barton is headteacher at King Edward VI School, Suffolk