

Selective School Preference Strategy

How to Choose Your Top 3 Schools Strategically

A free resource from Scholarly Training

For parents of Year 5 and Year 6 students in NSW

INSIDE THIS GUIDE:

- How the Selective allocation algorithm actually works
- Three proven preference strategies (and when to use each)
- Top Selective schools profiled: James Ruse, North Sydney, Sydney Boys/Girls, Baulkham Hills and more
- Common preference mistakes that cost families placements
- A printable decision worksheet to compare and rank your options
- Factors most parents forget (commute, culture, co-ed vs single-sex)

Your Preference Order Matters as Much as the Score

Most parents focus all their energy on test preparation. But the preference form is where placements are won and lost. Every year we see families whose child scored well enough for their second or third choice, but because they listed three aspirational schools, they ended up at a school that was not on their list at all.

You can nominate up to 3 Selective schools in order. The algorithm processes them sequentially. If your first preference does not work, it tries the second, then the third. This means your preference strategy needs to be as deliberate as your preparation strategy.

"A good score with a bad preference order can produce a worse outcome than a slightly lower score with a smart preference order."

Section 1

How the Allocation Algorithm Works

The NSW Department of Education uses a centralised allocation system. Here is a simplified version of how it works:

Step 1: All students are ranked by total test score

Every student who sat the test receives a composite score across all four components (reading, maths, thinking skills, writing).

Step 2: The algorithm processes preferences in order

Starting from the highest-scoring student, the system checks their first preference. If that school has capacity, the student is placed. If not, it checks the second preference, then the third.

Step 3: If no preference can be met

The student may be offered a place at the nearest Selective school with remaining capacity. This is often not a school the family considered or wanted.

Step 4: Offers are made

Families receive their placement offer and can accept or decline. Declined spots are reallocated in subsequent rounds.

The Key Insight

Your child is not competing against every student in NSW. They are competing against the students who listed the same schools. A school with 120 places and 800 first-preference applicants is very different from a school with 120 places and 200 first-preference applicants.

Section 2

Three Preference Strategies

Strategy A: "Aim High"

Preference 1 = Your dream school (highly competitive). Preference 2 = Realistic, good-fit school. Preference 3 = Safe option you would be happy with.

Best for: Students scoring in the top 5-10% of practice tests. Families with a clear first-choice school.

Strategy B: "Strategic Middle"

Preference 1 = Slightly aspirational but achievable. Preference 2 = Strong fit, realistic. Preference 3 = Safe, close to home.

Best for: Students scoring solidly but not in the top tier. Maximises chance of a good outcome across all three preferences.

Strategy C: "Location and Fit First"

Preference 1-3 ordered by commute time, school culture, and practical fit for your family rather than pure prestige.

Best for: Families who prioritise daily quality of life over rankings. A 90-minute daily commute adds up to 330+ hours per year that could be spent on study, sleep, or family.

Section 3

NSW Selective Schools at a Glance

The following table shows key Selective schools. Use it as a starting reference, not a complete list.

School	Type	Area	Competitiveness
James Ruse Agricultural	Co-ed	Carlingford	Extremely high
North Sydney Boys	Boys	Crows Nest	Very high
North Sydney Girls	Girls	Crows Nest	Very high
Sydney Boys	Boys	Moore Park	Very high
Sydney Girls	Girls	Surry Hills	Very high
Baulkham Hills	Co-ed	Baulkham Hills	High
Hornsby Girls	Girls	Hornsby	High
Normanhurst Boys	Boys	Normanhurst	High
Penrith	Co-ed	Penrith	Moderate-High
Hurlstone Agricultural	Co-ed	Glenfield	Moderate-High
Girraween	Co-ed	Girraween	High
Fort Street	Co-ed	Petersham	High
Caringbah	Co-ed	Caringbah	Moderate
Sefton	Co-ed	Sefton	Moderate

Section 4

Common Preference Mistakes

Mistake	Why It Hurts	What to Do Instead
Listing 3 dream schools with no realistic backup	If score falls short of all 3, your child is placed at whatever school has remaining capacity.	Preference 3 should always be a school you are confident your child can get into and happy to attend.
Choosing based only on rankings	The #1 ranked school may not suit your child's personality, learning style, or commute.	Visit schools. Consider culture, co-ed vs single-sex, commute, and extracurriculars.
Ignoring commute time	A 60+ min commute each way adds 500+ hours/year. That is time lost for study and sleep.	Map actual door-to-door travel in morning rush. Factor this into your preference ranking.
Only listing 1 or 2 preferences	Unused preference slots are wasted opportunities. You have 3 slots for a reason.	Always list 3. Use every preference slot strategically.

Section 5

Your Preference Decision Worksheet

Print this page. Score each factor from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

Decision Factor	School 1: _____	School 2: _____	School 3: _____
Academic reputation	___/5	___/5	___/5
Commute time (shorter = higher)	___/5	___/5	___/5
School culture / fit for your child	___/5	___/5	___/5
Co-ed vs single-sex preference	___/5	___/5	___/5
Extracurriculars	___/5	___/5	___/5
Realistic chance of placement	___/5	___/5	___/5
Overall gut feel	___/5	___/5	___/5
TOTAL	___/35	___/35	___/35

Tip: If two schools are within 2-3 points, commute time should be the tiebreaker. Your child will make this trip 400+ times over 6 years.

Your Next Step

Choosing the right schools is important. But it is only half the equation. The other half is making sure your child's score is strong enough to get into those schools. A perfect preference order means nothing without a competitive score across all four test areas.

Free Selective Strategy Call

In a free 15-minute call, we will:

- Discuss your child's current level across all 4 Selective test areas
- Identify the single biggest area to improve for maximum score impact
- Help you think through your preference strategy based on realistic score range
- Map out a preparation plan for your specific timeline

No sales pitch. If Scholarly is the right fit, we will explain how. If not, we will tell you that too.

BOOK YOUR FREE STRATEGY CALL

Limited spots each week. Your preference order matters. Get it right.

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