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In this issue...



Royal visit

Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal attended Bedford School last month to inspect the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) contingents from Bedford School, Bedford Girls' School, Bedford Modern School, and Bedford Greenacre Independent School, who gathered as part of their Annual General Inspection (AGI).

On arrival, Her Royal Highness was received by HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, Susan Lousada, before being introduced to the heads of the four schools and their Contingent Commanders. The parade then formed up for a general salute, followed by a detailed inspection which concluded with a full march past.

Following the inspection, Her Royal Highness proceeded to the Bedford School Memorial Hall to unveil a new Memorial Board commemorating 21 Old Bedfordians who lost their lives in the First World War. These individuals were identified through research undertaken by the school's alumni office and local historians. Their names now join the 756 names from both the First World War and Second World War already commemorated in the Hall, which celebrates its own centenary this year.

Relatives of the newly honoured Old Bedfordians attended the ceremony, bringing an important personal connection to the occasion.

Head of Bedford School, Mr James Hodgson, said: "Today allowed us not only to celebrate the dedication and professionalism of cadets from all four schools in Bedford, but also to honour the memory of Old Bedfordians whose stories deserve to be preserved and remembered. This new Memorial Board ensures that their legacy will continue to inspire a spirit of service in future generations."

Pictured: Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal unveiling the new Memorial Board

Cover background

Happy campers!

Cokethorpe School, Oxfordshire, has developed a new structured integration programme which has been designed to support pupils entering Year 7. This includes pupils taking part in an overnight camp which helps build belonging, resilience and emotional confidence from day one. Find out more on page 22.

Sometimes the most powerful way forward is knowing when to unplug.

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Is your school mentioned?

Schools featured in this issue include:

Alley's School, London; Ashville College; Ballard School; Bedford Girls' School; Bedford Greenacre Independent School; Bedford Modern School; Bedford School; Bolton School Boys' Division; Bolton School Girls' Division; Bradford Grammar School (BGS); Burgess Hill Girls; Cheadle Hulme School; Cokethorpe School; Dauntsey's; Dollar Academy; The Downs Malvern; Farlington School; Feltonfleet School; George Heriot's School; The Glasgow Academy; Glenalmond College; Gresham's School; Hall School Wimbledon (HSW); High School of Dundee; Holme Grange School; Kelvinside Academy; Kimbolton School; King's College School, Wimbledon; Loughborough Grammar School; Loughborough Schools Foundation; Merchiston Castle School; Milton Abbey School; Moorfield School and Nursery; Morrison's Academy; Mount Kelly; New Hall School; Queen Victoria School; Robert Gordon's College; Royal Hospital School (RHS); St Albans Education Group; St Aloysius' College St Columba's School; St Leonards School; Sidecot School; Solihull School; Stowe School; Strathallan School; Stewart's Melville College; Surbiton High School; Thornton College; Ursuline Prep School, Warley; Warminster School; Westholme School; Whitgift School; Windlesham House School; Wrekin College; Yarrells School

Re-imagining our edu

With employers today looking for more than just academic excellence, has the current education system become out of step with the demands of modern society? Deputy Head & DSL at King's College School, Wimbledon, Richard Amlot, explores how, while exams remain important, re-imagining the system to include developing holistic, future-ready skills, character, and purpose, can better help pupils prepare for the future.

It is a sad reality that too many children up and down the country do not enjoy school. It was ever thus. We all have friends and acquaintances who recall a negative experience of their school days. Moreover, we are living in a world that is changing at breakneck speed. Today's world demands agile innovators, incisive problem-solvers and creators who can tackle complex, tech-shaped challenges that barely existed ten years ago. A string of 9s, A*s, and a university education is no longer the holy grail of what employers are looking for. And yet, the foundation of our educational system is still operating as it was in the 1950s. We are still predominantly teaching our students to memorise facts and fight for grades. We need to re-imagine our education system. And here's how.

1. Identity discovery: Many students feel uncomfortable in their own skin, and yet remarkably few really think about who they are. Imagine an education system which encourages students to explore who they are, where they have

come from, and where they are going. Imagine a metacognitive philosophy of education, in which individual young people are helped to explore how they learn, how they think, and how they interact. Psychometric assessments are regularly used as recruitment and leadership tools in the workplace – so why not use these throughout school? This would give our students not only a greater sense of self-understanding but also a deeper ability to reflect on their learning and on their self-development. This approach would lead to a greater sense of independence, self-esteem, and confidence, as students would have the tools to shape their own learning and future, rather than being reliant on a more spoon-fed approach. And it should include a quest to understand, accept, and cherish one's own identity. Provided this came hand in hand with a supportive, open, and inclusive environment, then this would prove a wonderful antidote to the wellbeing challenges that can accompany diversity and difference.

2. Purpose discovery: A natural progression from identity exploration is purpose discovery. Children are all born with their own gifts but life and our education system are too often guilty of shoehorning them into boxes, instead of motivating them to explore what lights them up, what propels them forwards and what they are actually here for. In our schools, we need to move away from asking questions like "what do you want to be when you grow up?" Instead, we need to ask questions like: "what do you love? What impact do you want to make on the world?" Imagine each student being given multiple opportunities during their time at school to create their own projects based on what inspires them. Imagine an education system in which purpose and passion are activated for every young person. Imagine our school leavers being united in wanting to make the world a better place, in their own individual ways.

3. Character development: Schools have been talking about character development

for decades but to do this well is notoriously difficult. So how do we do this? We can talk to the students in assemblies about developing traits such as kindness, resilience, and collaboration. We can role model such traits. But a far more powerful way of helping students to cultivate such characteristics is through putting them in situations which are conducive to the development of such traits. This is why schools need to give more attention than ever to partnership work, charity work, and their co-curricular programmes. Putting students in a care home or special needs primary school are great ways of igniting empathy and a sense of social responsibility. This can broaden out the types of future jobs that our alumni go into, edging more towards social impact professions. And for the many independent school alumni who will still go onto work in the corporate and financial world, the fact that such influential people are imbued with a sense of perspective and social responsibility will have a considerable impact on the world at large.

Charity sleep out

Seven Upper Sixth pupils from Kimbolton School, Cambridgeshire, have raised over £500 to support homeless veterans across the UK by taking part in an overnight charity sleep out.

The group, all Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) in the school's Combined Cadet Force (CCF), organised and led the initiative in support of the Great

Tommy Sleep Out – a national campaign dedicated to raising awareness and funds for veterans experiencing homelessness.

The evening began with everyone gathering around a bonfire, before settling down to watch 'Top Gun'. As temperatures dropped to around 0°C, pupils prepared to spend the night outdoors. Equipped only with sleeping bags and basic shelter

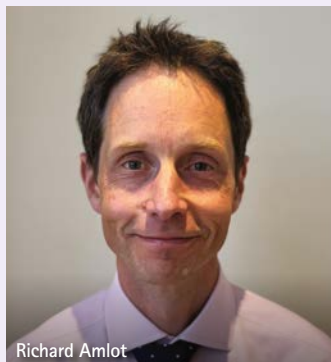
– without tents – they faced a bitterly cold night. By morning, frost coated their sleeping bags and hats, underscoring the challenging conditions they had endured.

Despite the harsh weather, the initiative proved a success. The funds raised will contribute directly to providing shelter, support, and essential services for homeless veterans.



Pictured: Around the bonfire

Education system



Richard Amlot

Now – here’s the game changer. Jobs require employees to overcome challenges, and of course adult life in general is full of these. Young people these days, for a myriad of reasons, are less good than ever at persevering and at summoning up resilience and grit. In schools, due to a bias towards rewarding performance, fear of judgement, and pressure from multiple stakeholders, we often fear struggle and failure. We need to transform this mindset and help our students to embrace these concepts and help them develop – through experience – the self-belief to back themselves that they can overcome future adversity and challenge. We need to give students chances to attempt something genuinely difficult, with adults nearby to guide, not rescue. And we need to facilitate reflective practice after setbacks. This mindset will set them up so well for the workplace and life more generally, as it is applicable to so many different contexts.

And it will do, in my view, more than anything else would do to improve the mental health of our young people.

4. Skills development: The world is moving at a faster pace than our curricula are. We need to do better in anticipating what skills our adults of the future will need to thrive in the workplace and in life more generally beyond school. We need to find better ways of helping them develop skills that will serve them well when their turn comes in the world. They need to cultivate adeptness in areas including critical thinking, oracy, creativity, problem solving, emotional intelligence, digital skills, and enterprise.

I am not a radical – I am not advocating for the abolition of public examinations. I believe in exams, as working towards them helps focus the mind, helps teach how to manage pressure, and helps cultivate a knowledge base and many other subject-specific skills that have enduring value beyond the exams. Knowledge provides a basis for creativity, for example. However, there is much more that we need to do beyond exams to help develop these skills that they will need in the workplace. We need to engage them more in real-world learning, and to provide the conditions for them to think critically, collaborate, and create. A good

starting point is making sure that the students understand what these skills are, and making them active participants in the journey of developing them.

5. Future-ready teaching: As the world of work continues to shift and technology evolves rapidly, teachers need training to help students develop the skills required for future challenges. Part of this involves strengthening STEM provision and equipping teachers to discuss emerging themes such as AI – not just what it does, but what it means for society: the ethics, the impact, and the possible effect on jobs, creativity, and relationships. Our approaches to assessment also need to evolve. Alongside traditional marking, we should train teachers to use more continuous, responsive, and formative dialogue. One useful tool is the viva-style assessment – short, structured verbal discussions where pupils explain their thinking and respond to questions in real time.

Let us help teachers create classrooms that function as small innovation hubs, where pupils are not only listening but also actively solving real problems. Let students come up with tech support that will help wellbeing; explore efficiencies in healthcare; propose climate solutions; and reimagine urban spaces. This is how we can help teachers nurture

a generation that is ready for anything.

I feel fortunate to work in a forward-thinking and outward-looking school that is leading the way in the areas I have described above. My school also prioritises relationships. In a fast-changing educational climate, we should remember that education at its finest has always been about connection and relationships. If we cast our minds back to our own school days, most of us are able to think of a teacher who inspired us. Mine was my Theology and Philosophy teacher, Mr Weaver. Why? Partly because he loved his subject and communicated enthusiasm for it – but mostly because he took a real interest in us as individuals.

Great teachers really get to know individual students and their families; they know when to guide, when to inspire, when to praise, when to rebuke. This has always been the case but it will become even more critical in the coming decades when we can expect to see ever-expanding proportions of young people with neuro-diverse profiles as well as those with mental health challenges. And in a world which continues to become more technological, the human touch in education will still be what makes all the difference. ”

Ducklings top the bill!

Some feathered newcomers have made a splash at Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow, with a brood of newly hatched ducklings being welcomed into the classroom as part of the school’s annual spring project.

The project allows pupils to experience the full life cycle first-hand, from incubation through to hatching, while learning about responsibility and animal care in a hands-on way.

From settling in for story time with a duck tale in the school library, to duck diving in their own miniature pool and even having a ball during a cheerful meet-and-greet with the school’s rugby captains, the ducklings have been fully immersed in school life.

Head of Junior School, Catriona Calvert, said: “Watching the ducklings hatch is a special moment for the pupils, caring for them helps build confidence and empathy.”



Pictured: Kelvinside pupil with some of the ducklings

Rebalancing childhood: championing an offline adventure movement

Sidcot School, Somerset, has launched an initiative that has been designed to help families rediscover the joy of tech-free play. Head, James Jones, outlines what their Offline Adventure is all about.

As educators in schools, we are no strangers to the persistent, thorny debate around children's screen use. Whether in staffrooms, parent evenings, or national headlines, the conversation is unrelenting – and for good reason. Across the country, families are grappling with how to raise children in a world where digital devices have become both a lifeline and a liability.

This year, at Sidcot's Junior School, we decided to stop talking around the issue and instead take direct, practical action. In partnership with Ocean Adventurers – a local soft play centre with a commitment to childhood wellbeing – we have launched the Offline Adventure¹, an initiative that invites families to rediscover the joy and developmental richness of tech free play.

We intentionally aligned our launch with Children's Mental Health Week, recognising the increasingly clear parallels between screen use, digital stimulation, and young people's mental wellbeing. As educators, we are all observing similar trends: rising anxiety, difficulty with sustained attention, and diminishing resilience when children are faced with boredom or unstructured time.

The second phase of our Offline Adventure, out in time for the Easter holidays, is well-timed in light of the recent Government guidance limiting screen-time to under one hour a day for children under the age of five. Again, the goal is to provide parents with practical support, without judgement.

Why screens continue to challenge us

To understand the local picture more fully, Sidcot School and

Ocean Adventurers surveyed over 1,000 parents across Somerset. The findings mirrored national trends but added nuance:

- 65% of parents rely on screens simply to “get things done”
- 58% use screens for entertainment
- 64% struggle to think of low cost offline activities during school holidays
- The top challenges? Juggling work and chores, plus the ever present complication of British weather

Introducing the Offline Adventure

Responding to the survey findings above, the Offline Adventure is intentionally simple. Children become “Offline Adventurers”, working their way through an illustrated Adventure Map built around the shared value of Live Adventurously. Activities stretch across imagination, exploration, creativity, and mindfulness. They include:

- Inventing new games
- Building dens
- Completing mini scavenger hunts
- Exploring the outdoors
- Trying small moments of calm or reflection

Each completed activity earns a tick on the map – a visual reminder that play is an essential part of our children's journeys of development, teaches essential life skills, and does not require plug sockets or pixels.

But beyond the charm of the map, the initiative has a more serious purpose: giving young people the tools to avoid screen dependency

before habits form. Prevention, rather than correction, must become our collective strategy.

What we learned about shifting culture

I share this initiative not as a model to replicate wholesale, but as an example of what is possible when schools, parents, and community partners align around a shared vision. Several insights have already emerged that I believe may be useful for other educators.

1. Don't treat screen time as a “parent issue” – treat it as a community one

Parents repeatedly told us that they felt isolated in navigating screen boundaries. By joining forces with a local organisation and signposting to national movements such as Smartphone Free Childhood and Parents Against Phone Addiction in Young Adults (PAPAYA), we broadened the circle of support.

No single school can shift the digital tide alone – but a collective movement can.

2. Offer alternatives, not just warnings

For years, the narrative around screens has focused heavily on dangers: sleep disruption, behavioural dysregulation, reduced attention span, and mental health challenges. These risks are valid, but insufficient. Parents want tangible solutions, not more guilt.

Our takeaway: If you want families to change habits, you must give them something better to reach for, not simply something to avoid.

3. Make the solution joyful

Children respond to story, play, challenge, whimsy, and ownership.



James Jones

An adventure map is not just instructions – it's an invitation. Whether your school explores badges, house competitions, or nature based quests, the key is to make tech-free time feel exciting, not punitive.

4. Accept that the goal is balance, not abstinence

Screens are part of modern childhood, and – used well – they can be tools for creativity and connection. Our aim was not to demonise technology but to ensure it doesn't dominate. The language of rebalancing proved far more effective than the language of restriction.

A responsibility beyond our gates

At Sidcot, we see it as our responsibility to stand alongside parents in shaping the habits that will support children throughout their lives. But that responsibility must extend beyond our own pupil roll. When it comes to the wellbeing of young people, none of us can afford to operate in silos.

I believe schools are uniquely placed to convene communities, set cultural expectations, and create momentum for healthier childhoods. Whether through large-scale programmes or small classroom based initiatives, we can each help make tech-free moments a normal part of daily life. Our Offline Adventure is just one step. I hope it encourages you to take yours.

¹ <https://www.sidcot.org.uk/student-news/ocean-adventurers-and-sidcot-school-go-offline-help-somerset-families>

Unplugging the classroom

After much thought and consideration, the Business Department at Morrison's Academy, Perthshire, have made the decision to remove most technology from lessons, apart from where it is needed for pupils with Additional Support Needs. Head of Business at the school, Craig Roy, outlines the reasoning behind the move and how there has been a shift in pupil attention and engagement since the change.



As the Scottish Government continues to invest heavily in digital learning, a worthwhile question is whether our increasing reliance on technology is quietly contributing to declining outcomes.

I often think back to when I was 17, sitting beside my friends in a computing room. The teacher gave us instructions and set us to work. I promptly opened Microsoft Paint and designed a fish. Before long, my friends had copied it, and we were using the arrow keys to "swim" our creations from one monitor to the next. We were amused. Others, I suspect, were similarly entertained behind blank expressions.

I was, by most measures, a "good kid." I had secured my university place in a school where only a quarter of pupils progressed to higher education. My friends were similar. Yet, given the opportunity, we still chose distraction over effort.

This isn't new. Today it might be TikTok, before that it was YouTube, before that, Minesweeper, or simply counting ceiling tiles. Distraction has always existed. What has changed is its immediacy and persistence.

At Morrison's Academy, our digital infrastructure is excellent. Devices are well integrated, internet access is stable and fast, and policies are clear. Yet the reality of the classroom tells a different story. A laptop won't connect, a charger is missing, and notifications flicker across screens. Each small interruption chips away at the routines that are imperative for learning.

Of course, each issue has a solution. We could sanction the lack of preparation, teach pupils to manage notifications, or rely on IT support. Or, we can take a simpler route: replace the device with a pencil and paper.

This year, our department made the deliberate decision to do just that. We removed most technology, except where it is essential for pupils with Additional Support Needs. This was not a decision taken lightly. It was grounded in careful discussion,

professional judgement, and most importantly, evidence.

At the heart of our thinking was a simple principle: how easy is it to make something work well?

The case for reducing technology in lessons rests on several key ideas. Firstly, writing is slower than typing – and that is a strength. When pupils write, they are forced to process and then prioritise. Typing allows for transcription with minimal thought, while handwriting demands engagement.

Secondly, accountability becomes clearer. In a classroom of open jotters, it is easy to see who is working and who is not. With screens, that clarity disappears. Monitoring becomes harder as moving around the classroom means not all screens are visible.

Finally, devices make it easy to provide multiple resources, but moving between them – switching tabs, managing windows, processing instructions – can be overwhelming to pupils. Their focus is on juggling systems, rather than on learning.

None of this is to suggest that digital skills are not essential. There is a clear need to equip pupils with the knowledge and capabilities required in a technology-driven world. However, simply giving every pupil a device does not achieve this. It doesn't align with the way in which we know pupils learn most effectively.

If we want pupils to develop meaningful digital skills, we must teach them through a carefully designed curriculum which includes modelling, practice, and assessment. Completing tasks on a laptop is not sufficient.

Importantly, this approach is not anti-technology – it is about intentionality. We use digital tools where they add value. Platforms such as Carousel Learning support retrieval practice in efficient and engaging ways. Google Classroom helps us organise resources and set deadlines. Extended writing tasks that require subtle adjustments or

redrafting are apt for Google Docs. Technology, after all, is astounding – and I am a better teacher for it. It enhances our professional lives, reduces workload, and opens up opportunities that were unimaginable a generation ago.

But in the classroom, we have to be disciplined. Before reaching for the laptop, we should ask: Is this improving learning or simply convenient?

When our department made this change, our aim was straightforward – to improve focus. What we have seen since is a shift in attention, in engagement and in the quality of thinking. My classroom feels calmer and more purposeful.

There is a growing conversation around this subject internationally. Increasingly, educators and

researchers are questioning the assumption that more technology leads to better learning. The emerging consensus is more balanced: digital tools should be used when they hold a defined pedagogical advantage.

For the Business Department at Morrison's Academy, that has meant returning to basics. Whiteboards, jotters, and structured materials are now the default. Technology is present, but has been reframed.

Ultimately, this move is not about rejecting innovation; it's about being intentional. Good teaching is not defined by tools, but by how effectively we use them.

Sometimes the most powerful step forward is knowing when to unplug.

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Commercial partnerships: the essentials

Schools should enter the space with open eyes, steady nerves, and a clear sense of who they are, suggests Director of Commercial Partnerships at Alleyn's School, London, Phil Clegg.

In my last article¹, I argued that commercial partnerships in schools need not be a guilty secret. Done well, they can bring genuine educational benefit as well as financial value. Done badly, they can be distracting, reputationally risky, and surprisingly costly in time and goodwill.

I am writing this from India, where I am on a Department for Business and Trade education mission for UK schools exploring partnerships here. The warmth is a particular pleasure after a long, wet winter in the UK, but the bigger reminder is this: there is serious appetite for working with British schools, and serious competition too. For any school that has decided this is a road worth travelling, the question is no longer whether to do it. It is what to do next.

My starting point is simple: do not begin with the partner. Begin with yourselves.

Schools can become strangely vague at exactly the point they need precision. "We'd like to do something international" or "we should explore commercial opportunities" may be understandable opening instincts, but they are not yet a strategy. Before speaking to prospective partners, be clear about the purpose. Are you looking for a school partnership overseas, commercial partnership with, say, a tech provider, a facility hire arrangement, a brand extension, a sponsorship relationship, or something else entirely? Those are very different propositions, requiring different expertise, carrying different risks, and demanding different levels of commitment.

This links directly to the point I made in my previous piece: commercial activity should serve the mission of the school, not

quietly distort it. If the idea does not support your educational aims, strengthen your wider community, or protect the long-term health of the institution, it is probably not the right opportunity, however attractive the headline figure may look.

That is also where non-negotiables matter. Educational quality comes first, obviously, but brand and values belong there too. At Alleyn's, as at many schools, the strength of the brand rests not just on academic reputation but on the values that sit beneath it. That is precisely why businesses and organisations may want to align themselves with a school in the first place. The danger is that schools can be so pleased to be wanted that they forget to ask whether the feeling should be mutual.

Once your purpose is clear, the next question is expertise. This is one of the commonest pitfalls. Schools are full of intelligent people, but that does not automatically mean they have experience in contracts, regulation, market due diligence, tax, governance, or cross-border partnership structures. A sensible school does not need to become cynical, but it does need to become well advised.

That does not mean outsourcing judgement. It means knowing where specialist knowledge is required and making sure it is in the room early enough. One of the most expensive habits in this area is bringing in experienced commercial, legal, financial, or local-market expertise only when a school is already emotionally committed. At that point, advice is heard as obstruction. Used earlier, it is simply good discipline.

Only then should you ask the practical question: what does the right partner look like?

Here I would strongly recommend resisting the temptation to be dazzled by enthusiasm, scale, or polished presentations. The best partner is not necessarily the biggest, richest, or most flattering. It is the one whose aims, standards, and way of working fit your own. In practical terms, I would keep returning to a handful of questions. Do they understand what your school actually values, or only what they think it can sell? Are they serious about educational quality, or mainly interested in a badge? Are they transparent when the conversation becomes awkward? Do they move at a pace compatible with careful governance? And if this works brilliantly, would you still be proud to be associated with them in five years' time?

That last question takes you directly to reputational risk. People sometimes hear that phrase and imagine only scandal, but the more common problem is subtler. A partnership can fail reputationally without ever becoming a newspaper story. It can simply feel wrong: misaligned tone, weak delivery, poor communication, inflated promises, or values that do not survive contact with reality. Schools trade heavily on trust. Trust, once thinned, is not quickly rebuilt.

So do the due diligence (or, given the context... homework!) properly. Speak to people who have worked with the organisation, not just the references carefully selected for you. Understand who really makes decisions. Be clear about financial assumptions, exit routes, and quality control. If you are operating overseas, understand the local context rather than assuming your domestic instincts will travel well. And if something feels off early on, pay attention.



Phil Clegg

In my experience, problems in partnerships very rarely arrive as a surprise. More often, they arrive exactly as previewed in the first few meetings.

There is one final pitfall worth naming: confusing income with success. Revenue matters, of course. Schools are under pressure, and rightly looking for sustainable income streams. But a partnership that consumes leadership time, muddies the brand, or creates endless operational friction is not a triumph just because it produces a line in a spreadsheet. Good commercial work in schools should be strategically useful, educationally defensible, and manageable in practice.

So, if your school has decided to pursue partnerships, be ambitious, but be precise. Start with purpose. Define your non-negotiables. Bring in the right expertise early. Test for fit before charm. And remember that the best partnerships are not those that move fastest, but those that can stand up to scrutiny once the excitement has worn off.

From India, where the conversations are energetic and the opportunities real, that feels like a fitting conclusion. There is much to be gained in this space. But schools should enter it with open eyes, steady nerves, and a clear sense of who they are.

¹ See 'Effective branding: mixing commercial and educational gains in the independent school sector' on page 7 of the February 2026 issue of *The Independent Schools Magazine* <https://www.independentschoolsmagazine.co.uk/issues/2026-february/#p=7>



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Food for thought: how fish and chips are helping to promote pupil voice, wellbeing and life skills

The Downs Malvern, Worcestershire, have introduced a new initiative which has seen Friday lunch develop into a forum for debating life's biggest questions. Dubbed "Chippy Chats", the scheme sees pupils discussing topics from artificial intelligence to mutual respect, with Year 8s leading the chats and staff joining in as equals. Head, Andy Nuttall, explains.

Young minds are not just shaped in the formal setting of the classroom – and at The Downs Malvern, we've found that some of the most profound character development happens over a humble plate of fish and chips.

Earlier this year, we introduced a simple idea to seamlessly embed essential life skills into the school week; something we call "Chippy Chats." Every Friday, we transform a familiar lunch into an opportunity for guided, cross-age dialogue and reflection, cementing our commitment to nurturing truly well-rounded, thoughtful, and articulate young people.

What makes this work isn't a complex mandate or a glossy new project. It grew organically out of our school's DNA. We already embrace a "family dining" set up, where mixed age groups sit together, fostering a strong sense of community. "Chippy Chats" simply took this setting a step further. We designed it with our Year 8 leaders in mind. We gave these senior pupils a clear leadership profile at the lunch table, creating a structured, meaningful opportunity for them to engage their younger peers which, in turn, lifts the entire student body.

"Chippy Chats" are a simple but powerful way of creating space for meaningful conversation in the middle of a familiar part of the school day. We're turning lunchtime into a dedicated moment for reflection and dialogue, which actively supports our wider commitment to nurturing well-rounded,

thoughtful, and articulate young people.

The mechanics are deceptively simple: every mixed-age table has prompt cards to guide discussions on a new topic each week, driving pupil voice, wellbeing, and essential life skills development.

Our discussions are wide-ranging and genuinely relevant. We cover the five fundamental British values, from individual liberty and democracy to tolerance of different faiths and mutual respect, but we also dive straight into current affairs and the realities of modern life.

Topics have included the technology and ethics of artificial intelligence, the debate around banning social media for under-16s, Children's Mental Health Week, and character development where the pupils have tackling dilemmas like friendship and loyalty and the old chestnut that making mistakes is the best way to learn.

The success of the programme hinges on two essential roles we established. First, the Year 8 leaders are the driving force; they lead the conversations, hone their communication skills, and ensure all younger peers are included. Second, staff participants. We join the tables at each session, but we are there not as instructors – we are active participants. Our presence reinforces mutual respect and openness, keeping the dialogue productive while the spotlight remains firmly on the pupil voice.

The impact on pupil confidence and skills is clear to us. This supportive, relaxed environment

allows children to practice expressing their ideas, listening thoughtfully, and engaging with diverse perspectives. The whole process helps our pupils to build confidence, empathy, and critical thinking skills, all while strengthening the sense of community that lies at the heart of The Downs.

We find the format particularly valuable for children who might feel hesitant in a traditional classroom setting. Our Year 8 leaders are explicitly briefed on maintaining a "low threat environment", making it an inclusive space where quieter students feel safe to contribute. We see the immediate results in the summary sessions at the end of lunch: pupils of all ages are eager to share their table's conclusions, demonstrating the leap in individual confidence and the successful cultivation of soft leadership skills among our Year 8 ambassadors.

The key to the success of this initiative has been, first and foremost, engaging our pupils. From the off, they have been involved in shaping how the programme runs. We initially used simple talking points but found deeper engagement came from evolving the structure into a more formal debate style.

It's also important to stress the value of leadership. Being transparent with our senior pupils about the dual reward: they are serving the school community and enhancing their personal development, is a fantastic way to challenge them and hone those highly valued "soft" leadership



skills, like managing a conversation and actively involving younger participants, that are harder to develop in conventional settings.

We have also found that prioritising the "low-threat" environment is another vital ingredient. Integration is key. Making the discussions part of a comfortable, familiar ritual like lunchtime, and focusing on the process of discussion rather than seeking a competitive result, guarantees that every child feels safe enough to share.

"Chippy Chats" is a wonderfully simple innovation, but it isn't just a quirky thing for us to do. We think it's a clear, effective template for any school looking to strengthen its community, boost student confidence, and seamlessly embed essential life skills into the daily routine.

While The Downs Malvern is proudly a phone-free environment, the wider world that our pupils are growing up in is one where conversations are often replaced by screen-based communication. By creating a regular opportunity for pupils to sit together, listen carefully, express their views and respond thoughtfully to others, "Chippy Chats" actively nurture these essential human skills. Pupils learn to articulate their ideas, disagree respectfully, consider different perspectives, and build confidence in speaking within a group. In this way we ensure that pupils continue to develop the communication, collaboration, and emotional intelligence that technology cannot replace.

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From ancient worlds to modern skills: why Classics has never been more relevant

With Classics provision shrinking across the UK due to state school subject cuts and university course closures, Loughborough Schools Foundation, Leicestershire, is making the case that the ancient world has never been more relevant to modern learners. Teacher of Classics at Loughborough Grammar School, Philip Harper, explains.

“If you teach Classics, you will know the moment. A polite but sceptical look that quietly questions whether the subject still has a place. University departments are closing, government funding for the Latin Excellence Programme has been cut, and state school provision is shrinking. It feels more important than ever to make the case for what our subject does that nothing else quite can.

At Loughborough Grammar School, we have been asking a different question. Not how do we protect Classics, but how do we make it undeniable. The answer lies in doing what the Romans would have done: embrace the best available technology.

Breaking the tweed jacket stereotype

The caricature of Classics as dusty texts and scholars in tweed is stubbornly persistent. I have spent the past few years doing my best to rewrite the narrative. In our Digital Classics club – for which I was awarded the 2025 Classical Association Teaching Award for Innovative Pedagogy – students do not just read about the ancient world, they build it.

This means students reconstructing Roman houses in Minecraft, working from archaeological reports to make historically accurate design decisions. It means VR walkthroughs of the Colosseum and Roman forum, built to true architectural scale so students can understand spatial relationships and engineering that no textbook photograph conveys. It means

3D-printed artefacts sourced from museum scans, allowing students to handle and analyse objects that would otherwise be locked behind glass, alongside world-building competitions judged by university academics and industry professionals.

For boys in particular, the gaming, engineering, and design elements remove a barrier that Latin declensions alone sometimes cannot. Once they are invested in the world, they want to understand it and that is when the linguistic and cultural learning takes hold.

The skills argument

Colleagues across many subjects are grappling with the AI question. What do we teach when so much can be automated? Classics has a better answer than most. For generations it has been a well-trodden route into highly analytical professions, and while AI is reshaping those fields, the human skillset Classics cultivates has never been more valuable. We need to shift perceptions from viewing the study of Greek and Latin like any other language, to like a puzzle. We are teaching to analyse, evaluate, assess data, and problem solve; there was a reason why Bletchley Park recruited classicists.

The study of Classics provides the ability to condense complex information into clear and concise meaning. Interpersonal awareness developed through studying history and human behaviour are the capabilities that AI cannot replicate and that employers are increasingly prioritising. As the professional world becomes more

automated, these softer and more nuanced qualities are becoming more sought after, not less.

Law has long recognised this. The Classics graduate who can construct an argument from fragmentary evidence and spot the flaw in a rival's case will be valuable for a long time. The civil service has recruited classicists since the Victorian age, valuing the rigorous logic and analytical rigour the subject instils.

My tip for colleagues making this case to students or sceptical parents: stop leading with the ancient world and start with the outcomes. Ask them what career they want, then show them how Classics gets them there. To reduce access to the subject at this moment is to deny students a pathway to the skills future careers will rely on.

The social mobility question we cannot ignore

There is a harder conversation beneath all of this. The national contraction of Classics provision means that increasingly, only pupils in independent schools have meaningful access to it. University course closures and the removal of state school funding have seen to that. It should trouble all of us.

We run a free online lecture series open to anyone regardless of where they study, and we are developing an outreach project to invite state school pupils into our VR lab to build and explore ancient worlds alongside our own students. These are not grand gestures but an acknowledgement that if the independent sector



is one of the last places where Classics genuinely thrives, we have a responsibility to share it.

One of our alumni, now reading at Durham and preparing for postgraduate research, has created Latin learning resources for use in prisons, using the roots and stems of the language to support incarcerated adults in building their literacy. It is one of the most eloquent arguments I know for keeping this subject accessible: an ancient language opening modern doors.

What I would say to colleagues thinking about this

If you are a Classics teacher in an independent school: do not wait for the national picture to improve. Use what you have. The independent sector still has the timetable space and institutional goodwill to do extraordinary things with this subject, but only if we make the most of it.

You do not need a VR lab or a 3D printer to do what we do, though both help. You need a willingness to meet your students where they are and to connect what you love about the ancient world to what they care about in the present one.

In a world being reshaped by AI, its human qualities are not a weakness, they are its strength. The subject is not a relic, it is a discipline that builds thinkers, communicators, creators, and innovators, and we cannot afford to lose it.

Rethinking reporting

When starting as Deputy Head (Academic) at Gresham's School, Norfolk, Darrell Chart-Boyles undertook a review of the school's tracking and reporting system. Here he examines what he found and how by rethinking it they have been able to better manage parental expectations, communicate Target Grades to drive progress and attainment, as well as build a schedule that is mindful of teacher workloads.



Moving from the state sector, where I had been a Senior Leader for over a decade, to join Gresham's as Deputy Head (Academic) in January 2024, the most obvious area under my remit that was ripe for reform was the school's tracking and reporting system. I likened trying to interpret the reporting schedule to staring into the Matrix where, instead of green letters and numbers tumbling vertically down the screen, a baffling mix of grade cards, short reports, full reports, valedictory reports, data drops, comments from teachers, Tutors, HSMs, and the headmaster jostled for space in the school's already packed calendar.

It was nobody's fault that the tracking and reporting system had got to this point. It had simply fallen victim to what Peps McCrear, in one of his recent (excellent) 'Evidence Snacks', referred to as "additive bias" – the idea that, "when a problem arises... the default response is often to add something new," focusing on the hoped-for benefits of these new initiatives rather than their cumulative burden.

My starting point for rethinking reporting at Gresham's was to practise what McCrear calls "ruthless simplicity," stepping back from the schedule to consider what we wanted to achieve for our teachers (reports had to be manageable), for our parents (reports had to be meaningful), and for our pupils (reports had to be motivational).

I began by speaking to a group of our parents who told me that the process of checking reports fell to tutors who often did this with the pupils themselves, meaning that pupils had sight of their teachers' feedback before their parents did, giving them a chance to, shall we say, "frame" the narrative around anything that they knew their parents might not be best pleased

with! Alarming, some tutors were allowing pupils to take photos of their draft reports which parents were then being sent via family WhatsApp groups, many days ahead of the school "officially" sending them home. Parents also told me that receiving reports midway through the first week of each holiday meant they could not easily follow up anything that they wanted to question or action.

I took away from this session many useful quotes that I shared with colleagues during a subsequent INSET: "It should sound like the teacher really knows my child," "there should be no nasty surprises," "it should be clear what we can do to help," and my personal favourite "I can smell a copy-and-pasted sentence"!

My roundtable session with a selection of pupils (drawn from different year groups, subject combinations, and ability levels) highlighted inconsistencies in the way subjects were commenting on pupils' progress ("Is my grade what I'm achieving now or what I'm going to get?"), the need for teachers to always highlight at least one positive, and pupils' desire for specific, achievable targets so that they had a better sense both of where they needed to go and how they could get there.

Predictably, feedback from colleagues focused on the unsustainable workload involved in writing a report on every pupil at the end of every half term, and how this in turn led to reports that were of mixed quality, accuracy, length, and usefulness.


So what does tracking and reporting look like at Gresham's now? All reports are sent out during term time, the first in Week 3: all new pupils to the school receive a 'Settling In' report with positive comments from their tutor and HSM focused on the

initial impact they have made academically and in house. Over the course of the year, all pupils receive two 'Brief Reports' which give a snapshot of whether pupils are working on, above, or towards their expected attainment. These reports only include comments from teachers if pupils have been identified as tracking "towards", or if they have received a C or D grade for behaviour, effort or prep.

Full Reports are written on each pupil just once per year and it is here that we have focused on being more consistent with the comments colleagues are writing. Each report starts with a single-sentence overview of what the pupil is like in lessons, followed by two positives and a single, specific

target. Colleagues asked for more specific guidance on what these new-style Full Reports should look like so I wrote a series of "models" in order to more clearly articulate my vision for them.

Rethinking reporting in this way has had positive, tangible impacts: a sharp reduction in teachers' workload, a significant increase in the quality and consistency of the reports themselves, as well as positive feedback from pupils and their parents around the reports' usefulness. For me, reforming our tracking and reporting system has provided proof that "ruthless simplicity" can be brought to even the most seemingly complex of school processes.



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Stronger together?

How to approach joining a school group

"A successful partnership is built on trust from the outset," says Principal at St Albans Education Group, Hertfordshire, Amber Waite, as she offers practical guidance for schools considering joining a group.

As the independent education sector evolves in response to the shifting economic landscape, more schools are exploring the option of joining a group. At St Albans Education Group, we have not only noticed a change in frequency of these conversations, but also a change in their tone. Increasingly, we are speaking with confident, forward-thinking governors and leaders who are not reacting to crisis, but planning for long-term sustainability and future growth.

At its best, joining a group is not about rescue, it is about partnership.

For many schools, the potential benefits are clear. Greater financial resilience, access to capital, economies of scale, and the support of experienced central teams can all create the space for school leaders to focus on what matters most: delivering an outstanding education. For some, it also provides reassurance during times of uncertainty, particularly in a climate of rising costs and increasing regulatory complexity.

However, joining a group is a significant decision which requires careful thought, honest reflection, and a clear understanding of what success looks like for your school community.

So, where to begin?

Start the conversation early

Before you feel you need to. Schools that start the process from a position of relative

strength inevitably have more choice, more negotiating power, and more time to find the right partner. Waiting until a financial challenge becomes acute can narrow options considerably.

Keep an open mind

It is tempting to begin with a preferred group, but the most successful partnerships often come from a broader exploration of the landscape. Speak to a range of organisations and take time to understand how each operates. Every group has its own ethos, governance structure, and approach to supporting schools. The key question you should be asking is: "which group feels like the right fit for our school's values, ambitions, and community?"

Ask searching questions

And expect evidence. Early conversations are your opportunity to understand not just what a group promises, but how it delivers. Ask about their track record: how have other schools fared after joining? What support is provided during periods of change? How are decisions made, and where does accountability sit? Good partners welcome questions and will respond with clarity and transparency.

Be open, honest, and realistic

A successful partnership is built on trust from the outset. Be candid about challenges rather than trying to present an overly

polished picture. Any issues will come to light during due diligence, and openness early on allows both parties to assess whether there is a viable and positive path forward. Equally, it is important for schools to be realistic about their own trajectory and to share sensible thoughts on how a group can help them implement strategic change to secure their future.

Understand what will change

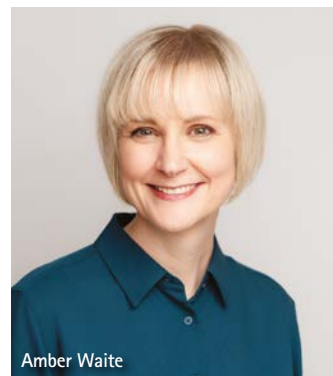
Joining a group will bring change, sometimes more than anticipated. Systems may be centralised, reporting lines may shift, and there may be restructuring as part of aligning the school within the wider organisation. While necessary and ultimately beneficial, it can feel unsettling for staff and requires thoughtful leadership. Being clear about this from the outset helps to manage expectations and reduce uncertainty.

Prepare for the process

The practical side of joining a group is often underestimated. Due diligence is a detailed and demanding process, particularly for bursars and finance teams, and requires accurate, timely production of information. Ensuring that your team has the capacity to manage this while continuing the day-to-day running of the school is essential.

Focus on communication

If there is one factor that consistently underpins successful



Amber Waite

transitions, it is communication. Staff, parents, and pupils will all have questions, concerns, and, in some cases, anxieties. A clear, thoughtful communication plan, delivered with honesty and empathy, makes an enormous difference.

Expect the unexpected

No two mergers are the same. Timelines shift, challenges emerge, and it will require flexibility and resilience. What matters most in these moments is the strength of the relationship between the school and the group. Where there is mutual trust and a shared commitment to the school's future, solutions can almost always be found.

Keep people at the heart

Ultimately, schools are communities, defined not by structures or systems, but by the people within them: pupils, staff, families, and the wider network of support that surrounds them.

Joining a group can be positive and empowering, enabling schools to thrive, not just survive. And in a changing educational ecosystem, a sense of shared purpose and collective strength has never been more important.

If you are looking for advice about joining a group or just an informal chat about any of the points I have raised here, please do get in touch (principal@staeg.org.uk) – I would love to hear from you.

Partnership

Moorfield School and Nursery, West Yorkshire, has joined Bradford Grammar School (BGS).

The agreement brings Moorfield into the BGS Foundation while retaining its ethos, leadership, and identity and builds on an established relationship between the two schools.

For Moorfield, the agreement is said to provide stability and strategic backing at a time when many independent schools are strengthening collaboration across the sector to navigate a period of significant change.

Head of Moorfield, Jessica Crossley, commented: "To have been chosen

by Bradford Grammar School is a real accolade for us. They understand what makes Moorfield special. This partnership protects that and will give confidence to parents and staff alike. We will continue to be Moorfield School – but with the support of a larger foundation behind us."

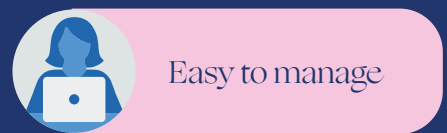


Jessica Crossley with Head of BGS, Dr. Simon Hinchliffe



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Delivering consistent playing surfaces at Stowe School with ISEKI

At Stowe School, sport plays a central role in both its identity and its appeal, with high-quality playing surfaces supported by a fleet of ISEKI machinery helping to underpin that reputation.

Across a growing estate of pitches, training areas, and specialist facilities, the focus is on delivering consistent, high-performance surfaces that reflect the standards of the modern game.

That environment has helped establish clear pathways for talented students to progress, with the school producing athletes across multiple disciplines and maintaining strong links with Northampton Saints. Former pupils continue to move into elite sport, reinforcing the importance

of both opportunity and the conditions in which that talent is developed.

For Grounds Manager Steve Curley, the connection between sport and surface quality is fundamental.

“It’s a big part of what makes Stowe attractive,” he explains. “We have a lot of scholars who come here because of their sporting ability.”

That sporting reputation is reflected in a growing list of alumni. Cricketer Ben Duckett is

among those to have progressed through the school, alongside county players including Graham White, Rob White, Mark Nelson, and Jason de la Peña.

More recently, former pupil James Rudkin secured Olympic gold in the men’s eight rowing at the Paris 2024 Games, further highlighting the level of performance associated with the school.

Strong links with Northampton Saints have also created a clear pathway in rugby, with players progressing into the club’s academy and beyond.

Among them is Archie McParland, who credits his early experiences at Stowe as an important part of his development.

“I’ve been very fortunate to play from a young age at Stowe on the grounds there, which are well looked after,” he says.

“The work that goes into the pitches has helped me focus on my game and strive for bigger things.”

Maintaining consistency across the site

As the school has expanded, maintaining that standard across an increasing number of facilities has become a greater challenge.

Growth in pupil numbers and sporting provision has placed more demand on the surfaces, making consistency a key objective for the grounds team.

“The consistency is what we’re all trying to aim for,” says Steve. “We’re trying to give them the best possible surfaces that you can play on, so it gives them a bit of an advantage when they go and play elsewhere.”

That responsibility extends beyond traditional pitches.

Even the rowing lake requires regular intervention, with specialist work carried out to remove weed and maintain clear water, ensuring rowers can train and compete without restriction.

To support this level of work, Stowe relies on a fleet of ISEKI machinery supplied by RT Machinery, which provides the



versatility needed to efficiently manage a wide range of tasks.

“We use a multitude of ISEKI machinery,” Steve explains. “They’re reliable, they work well and give us the flexibility to carry out a range of tasks across the school.”

Machinery supporting performance

For Assistant Grounds Manager Kevin Beasley, that flexibility is essential as workloads continue to increase.

“The site’s changed quite a lot,” he says. “There’s a lot more children, a lot more sporting areas, so there’s a lot more work.”

“We currently operate five ISEKI machines, including four tractors and an SXG 326 ride-on mower, each playing a specific role in maintaining standards across the school.”

“Our SXG operates in multiple areas. In the autumn, it’s ideal for collecting leaves and debris, while in the summer, it’s used across the school to maintain utility areas. One of the big advantages is the



high tip, and it performs very well in both wet and dry conditions. It doesn’t drop anything, so we’ve got full confidence in it.”

Alongside the SXG, tractors within the fleet handle heavier maintenance tasks.

“We also use the TG 6490 tractor, equipped with an IQ gearbox, for tasks such as verti-draining and rough mowing. It makes life much easier when controlling speed, especially when pulling

equipment, as adjustments can be made smoothly without relying on a clutch.”

Smaller tractors within the fleet are used for spraying and operating PTO-driven equipment, offering a balance of power and minimal surface impact.

“They’re lightweight but capable,” he adds. “We can run a 300-litre sprayer without leaving marks, which is really important for us.”

Across the school, that combination of skilled management, high standards and reliable machinery ensures that every surface plays its part in supporting the school’s sporting ambitions.

“We’ve got a big confidence in the ISEKI range, and we’ve been using it for four years now,” Kevin says. “It’s good machinery, and it’s ideal for what we need.”

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Building more than worlds: how Minecraft esports became part of a fixture list

Since writing about their journey into esports in this magazine last year, Thornton College, a girls' school in Buckinghamshire, has developed and launched its very own esports competition for prep and primary schools. Head of Computing at the school, Chris Lovell, explains how and why it all came about.



“When is our next match?” “Who are we playing?” “Am I in the team?” The questions were the same as those asked before a netball or hockey match. The preparation: tactics, team selection, nervous energy beforehand, debrief afterwards – identical too. Only the setting differed: an esports fixture in ICT1 at 4pm, played online against a school at the other side of the country.

A year ago, I wrote in this magazine about our first hesitant steps into esports: a pilot programme, a national competition, girls discovering that competitive gaming could feel as significant as any sports competition. The competition infrastructure we wished for did not fully materialise – so we built what we needed, school to school, teacher to teacher. The question shifted from why esports? to why not more of it?

What is esports

For readers unfamiliar with the term, esports simply means organised, competitive video gaming – structured and purposeful, not casual play. In schools, it enhances digital skills, collaboration and social connection.

Why we created our own competition

Our motivation came immediately after our first GSA esports competition. The girls returned with

the familiar hunger of competitive pupils: “When is our next match?” “Who else can we play?” They wanted fixtures, not one-off events. The questions were no different to those asked after any successful netball or hockey tournament.

Yet my search for additional competitions revealed a gap. Existing national programmes were impressive – but they appeared designed for experienced teams with established coaches and were skewed towards older age groups. For prep school children and teachers finding their feet in competitive gaming, the step up was daunting. We could have waited for competition structures to mature. Instead, we chose to build something ourselves.

I posted a brief announcement on social media. Within days, several primary and prep schools had replied. The practicalities proved straightforward: a shared document of simple rules, a test of our technical infrastructure, our first fixture confirmed. The competition grew by word of mouth, teacher to teacher, each new participant bringing refinements – fairer judging criteria, clearer protocols, better ways to handle the inevitable technical hiccup.

What began as a response to our own pupils' enthusiasm has become a small network of schools, sharing

fixtures, ideas, and the collective discovery that competitive gaming belongs on the prep school calendar.

Launching the programme

We chose Minecraft Education deliberately. Build battles in Minecraft reward creativity, collaboration, and communication – qualities already cultivated in our classrooms. Most pupils arrived with some familiarity, lowering the barrier to entry. Crucially, Minecraft Education operates through dedicated servers that we control. Only invited schools with approved accounts can access our competition worlds. No external players, no public servers, no unexpected encounters – just the competing teams and supervising teachers in a closed, moderated environment

Our competition format is straightforward: themed build battles with clear judging criteria, run entirely online. Teams have thirty minutes to construct before presenting their work. Judges score on creativity, teamwork, and technical execution.

The esports transformation

Our pupils have seized ownership of the programme. Year 6 girls – now experienced from a year of competition – mentor newcomers through structured peer support, modelling the communication and resilience they themselves developed. They create tournament rules, design training sessions for younger players, run practice fixtures to refine teamwork, and personally guide novices through their first build battles. These are authentic leadership experiences – not delegated tasks, but genuine responsibility with visible impact.

The transformation extends beyond technical skills. A parent stopped me recently to describe her daughter's newfound confidence in mentoring younger players, “I've never seen her like this,” she said. “She's found her confidence.” This mirrors broader

patterns: esports nurtures vital skills including communication, resilience, and leadership, particularly for girls who may feel excluded from traditional team sports. The girl who once needed encouragement now provides it.

The benefits ripple outward. Research has shown that children that participate in esports show increased engagement in STEM subjects and improved digital citizenship. School friendships form through shared competition. Most significantly, girls who never saw themselves as sporting now represent their school with pride.

To colleagues considering this path: start small. A single social media post, one willing partner school, a trial fixture. Minecraft Education requires only modest hardware – it's likely that your school's computers already suffice. The dedicated server feature ensures complete control over who enters your competition world. Free resources from Minecraft Education guide tournament setup and build challenge formats. We began with four schools; we now host regular fixtures across our network. The infrastructure exists. The demand from pupils is genuine. The only missing element is someone willing to organise the first match.

I welcome hearing how other schools progress. I regularly speak with prep and senior school colleagues who are curious about taking their first step into esports but are uncertain on how to proceed – often the same hesitation I felt two years ago. The questions are invariably practical: What equipment? Which platform? How do we safeguard? These conversations remind me that the barrier is rarely complexity; it is simply knowing where to begin. If you are considering esports, or have already begun, please contact me at clovell@thorntoncollege.com. Tell me how you are getting on, I'd love to hear from you.



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Are we still testing the right things in the age of AI?

Head, Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh, Huw Jones, reflects on why critical thinking, emotional intelligence and communication may matter more than memorisation in the age of AI.



Artificial intelligence is forcing education to confront an uncomfortable question: are we still testing the right things?

For much of modern schooling, the emphasis has been clear – what matters is what pupils remember in an exam hall. That approach made sense in an era when information was scarce and access to knowledge limited. But the world our pupils are entering now looks very different.

Today a pupil can access information instantly, summarise a topic in seconds, and generate an essay at the click of a button. In that context, the central question education asks cannot remain: “What do you know?”. Increasingly, it must become: what can you do with what you know?

Can you question information? Can you connect ideas together? Can you recognise weak arguments, apply judgement, and communicate your thinking clearly? Those are very different intellectual muscles.

None of this diminishes the importance of knowledge. Schools

should be citadels of curiosity and intellectual challenge. Knowledge remains the foundation upon which deeper thinking is built.

But after more than two decades working in education, I have seen enough young people leave school to know that examination results tell only a very small part of the story.

Some pupils sail through exams but struggle when life becomes less structured. Others, who were never top of the academic rankings, thrive because they possess something else – courage, curiosity, perspective, and the ability to build meaningful relationships.

At Merchiston, we think about education in two parts: what pupils achieve, and the capabilities they develop along the way. Alongside academic outcomes we should support them to develop the internal tools that will enable them to thrive beyond the school’s walls: emotional awareness, attentional control, communication, critical thinking, and, arguably most important, a positive and resilient mindset.

Artificial intelligence sharpens the importance of those qualities and tools. In a world where information is abundant, the challenge is no longer access to knowledge but navigating it wisely.

Young people today are growing up in an environment of constant noise, stimulation, and comparison. The ability to focus attention, interpret information critically, and make thoughtful decisions becomes increasingly valuable.

Schools have a responsibility not simply to shield pupils from the modern world but to prepare them for it.

Take smartphones and tablets. Many schools have introduced restrictions or bans, which I understand. Boundaries matter, and young people no doubt benefit from time away from the constant stimulus of these devices. But if we stop there, we risk missing a bigger opportunity.

When pupils leave school, they will be surrounded by these devices and their associated pull every day. Simply removing them during school hours does not teach them how to manage them.

Education today should help young people understand how attention works, why algorithms shape what they see and how easily perception can be influenced by extreme or emotionally charged content. In doing so, we equip them with those tools that will help them navigate the world as it is now, and as it will increasingly become.

In a boys’ school, this work takes on particular importance. Merchiston remains Scotland’s last all-boys school, which allows us to be intentional about how boys learn and grow.

Boys often benefit from structure, challenge and strong relationships with adults. They can also find it harder to speak openly about how they are feeling. Many boys want to be cared for, but are not always

sure how to receive that care.

Part of our responsibility is helping them develop the self-awareness and emotional literacy that will allow them to thrive later in life. Sometimes that happens through conversations about stress and pressure. Sometimes through mentoring or reflection. Often it happens simply through the presence of teachers who know them well. These things may sound small, but over time they shape character.

When young people leave school, life rarely presents itself as a neatly structured exam question. Employers increasingly seek people who can communicate clearly, collaborate with others and bring different perspectives together. Artificial intelligence can generate information quickly, but it cannot replace human judgement or connection.

Exams will likely remain part of education for some time yet. They serve a purpose and offer one way of measuring academic achievement. But AI invites us to ask a broader question.

If the world increasingly values creativity, emotional intelligence and critical thinking, yet our systems still reward memory above all else, are we truly measuring the things that matter most?

Education has always evolved as society changes. Artificial intelligence is simply the latest development prompting us to rethink what learning should prepare young people for.

Perhaps success at school should not only be measured by what pupils remember for an exam, but by the curiosity, confidence, and character they carry with them long after they leave.

That may be the truest measure of education’s purpose.

Commonwealth Day service

Eight members of the Upper Two class from Ursuline Prep School, Warley, Essex, accompanied by two staff attended the Commonwealth Day Service of Celebration at Westminster Abbey, following an invitation from the Maltese High Commission.



The service began and concluded with a procession featuring representatives of different faith communities, dignitaries from the UK government and other Commonwealth nations, honorary guests, and the flags of the Commonwealth.

The children were able to exchange smiles, waves, best

wishes, and handshakes with guests including His Majesty the King, Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, His Excellency Professor Stephen Montefort (High Commissioner of Malta to the UK), Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Oti Mabuse, and Floella Benjamin.

Pictured: At Westminster Abbey for the Commonwealth Day service

New Tribunal ruling unlocks major VAT recovery for schools

Independent schools across the UK are facing unprecedented financial pressures, from rising operating costs to VAT changes. In this climate, many are exploring secure and compliant opportunities to strengthen their financial position.

If your school registered for VAT in 2025, you are entitled to recover VAT on goods (four years) and services (six months) incurred before registration – something HMRC previously restricted incorrectly.

A Tribunal ruling in February 2026 confirms VAT reclaim opportunity for independent schools

A recent First-tier Tribunal ruling has clarified that many schools can reclaim pre-registration VAT that was previously restricted by HMRC at the time of VAT registration.

It is estimated that HMRC limited school recoveries by 50%–80%, meaning many schools recovered only part of the VAT they were entitled to.

In *ASPIRE IN THE COMMUNITY (TC/2022/04587)*, the Tribunal confirmed that HMRC's approach to pre-registration VAT recovery was not consistent with the law.

HMRC had previously restricted recoveries on costs incurred before VAT registration, based on how goods or services were used at the time of purchase, even when these costs clearly supported taxable activities afterwards.

The Tribunal now allows schools to:

- Revisit past claims
- Reclaim restricted amounts
- Recover statutory interest

This applies to schools of all sizes, including specialist and SEND schools. Eligibility is dependent on the purchases your school has made and the VAT charged, including VAT on school fees.

Even smaller schools may potentially recover thousands or tens of thousands of pounds under the ruling.



The Tribunal confirmed that independent schools can reclaim VAT on:

- Goods purchased up to four years before registration
- Services received up to six months before registration

"There is no statutory basis for HMRC to take account of pre-registration use... HMRC has no discretion to limit input tax on this basis."

Judge Michaela Snelders

Why schools are turning to VAT solutions

VAT Solutions led the litigation that secured this ruling. We are BAR-accredited, and our team includes former senior HMRC VAT professionals, ATT qualified

specialists, and authorised tax agents with extensive experience supporting businesses with VAT recovery involving complex case law.

We work alongside your existing accountants and advisors to ensure every aspect of our work for you is accurate, compliant, and supported by robust technical reasoning.

Schools benefit from:

- Tribunal-tested interpretation of the ruling
- Deep insight into HMRC's processes
- A structured, practical approach tailored to your school
- A Flexible, School-Friendly Process

Stage 1: Technical review & eligibility assessment – Fixed-fee or time-based, depending on your preference.

Stage 2: Claim preparation, HMRC engagement & recovery –

Reduced time-based rate plus a performance-related element.

A significant opportunity for schools

Many schools invested in:

- professional services
- digital infrastructure
- refurbishments
- equipment

and other improvements before compulsory VAT registration in 2025.

Much of this expenditure included recoverable VAT that HMRC previously restricted. Under the Tribunal-confirmed position, these restrictions were not legally supported.

Reclaiming VAT on qualifying expenditure between 2021 and 2025 may provide a valuable financial uplift at a critical moment for schools.



A brief discussion can determine whether your school has a meaningful recovery opportunity and provide an estimate of the VAT your school may be able to reclaim.

Happy campers!

How one school's approach is improving pupil transition to senior school

Cokethorpe School, Oxfordshire, has developed a structured integration programme designed to support pupils entering Year 7. Redefining the traditional model, new pupils now take part in an overnight camp. Head of First Form at the school, Amy Prior, explains more.



We know that the transition from primary to senior school is one of the most significant moments in a pupil's educational journey. Within the independent sector, this move into First Form has historically been associated with academic stretch and co-curricular opportunity.

Yet, my experience, combined with formal training through the University of Oxford's Mindfulness in Schools Project, has shown that strong pastoral foundations from the outset are what truly enable pupils to flourish.

Having worked across both the state and independent sectors as a Head of Year and later as Director of Key Stage 4, I have seen how early gaps in resilience and self-efficacy can shape outcomes later in a pupil's schooling.

By the time pupils reach GCSE years, those who struggle often lack the confidence and emotional security needed to fully access their learning.

These are not qualities that can be quickly remedied at that stage. They need to be intentionally developed much earlier.

This understanding has shaped our school's approach to transition. At Cokethorpe, we redefined the traditional model by placing an overnight camp at the very heart of the First Form experience. This isn't simply an introductory activity, it

is a structured, research-informed pastoral intervention designed to build belonging, resilience, and emotional confidence from day one.

Delivered in partnership with experienced outdoor education specialists, the camp provides pupils with an immersive experience before they enter the classroom. Through activities such as climbing, water sports, and team challenges, pupils are encouraged to step outside their comfort zones in a supportive environment. They also spend the night in shared accommodation within their house groups alongside peers they have only just met.

At this age, friendships are the single most important factor in a child's sense of security. One of the greatest anxieties surrounding the move to senior school is the fear of not knowing where one fits. The overnight camp accelerates the process of connection. Shared challenges and adventures create bonds far more quickly than time spent in a classroom.

By the time pupils begin their formal lessons, they already have a sense of who their peers are, who they can turn to and where they belong within the school community. This is particularly important in an independent setting where pupils join from a

range of feeder schools. Ensuring that every child feels included from the outset is essential to successful integration.

The benefits of the camp extend well beyond peer relationships. For staff, it provides a unique and concentrated view of pupils in a dynamic setting, offering early insights that are invaluable. We are able to identify pupils who may be more hesitant socially, those who might withdraw or those who may need support in navigating group dynamics.

This allows for early and targeted intervention. Rather than waiting for concerns to emerge later in the term, we can respond proactively, often before issues become embedded.

In my previous roles, I saw how challenges that were not addressed early could become significantly more complex over time. The overnight camp helps us to prevent that trajectory.

Another key element is the deliberate focus on resilience. The camp is designed to introduce manageable levels of uncertainty and challenge. Whether it is attempting a new activity or simply spending a night away from home, pupils are encouraged to embrace appropriate and personalised levels of discomfort as part of growth and positive outcomes.

Pupils are supported to understand what is happening in their brains when they feel anxious or uncertain and to recognise that these feelings are both normal and manageable.

This combination of hands-on learning and psychological understanding enables pupils to begin developing genuine resilience from the outset.

The structure of the camp also reflects the wider values of the school. Activities are carefully

organised to ensure pupils do not simply gravitate towards familiar peers. Instead, they are encouraged to form new connections, supported by the house system, which provides an immediate sense of identity and belonging.

In many respects, the overnight camp acts as a microcosm of school life. Pupils explore collaboration, independence, challenge, and reflection within a supportive framework. It establishes expectations around community, behaviour, and engagement that continue throughout the First Form year and shape their journey through the school.

Importantly, the impact of this experience is sustained. It provides a shared reference point for both pupils and staff. Conversations about resilience, relationships, and stepping outside one's comfort zone can be revisited and reinforced as pupils progress through the year.

Of course, the overnight camp is not a standalone solution. It sits within a wider pastoral framework that includes small tutor groups, regular one-to-one conversations, and a strong culture of pupil voice. However, it provides a powerful and intentional starting point.

Within the independent sector, schools are uniquely placed to design transition experiences that go beyond the traditional. Overnight camps offer a compelling model. They combine pastoral care, community building, and personal development in a way that is both immediate and lasting.

Ultimately, if we want pupils to succeed, we need to make sure they feel secure, connected, and confident from the very beginning. When that foundation is in place, everything else tends to follow.

In my experience, there is no better way to start that journey than with an overnight camp.



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Profile

In conversation with Pippa Adams

Schools and Universities attended:

University of Liverpool,
University College London,
University of Surrey,
University of Nottingham

First Job:

Groom at a stables

First job in independent education:

Head of English

Appointed to the current job:

September 2025

Favourite food:

Any kind of kind of fruit or vegetable

Favourite drink:

Coffee

Favourite holiday destination:

Anywhere

Favourite leisure pastime:

Walking

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Contact the editor:

editorial@
independentschoolsmagazine.co.uk

Q Prior to your teaching career you worked in publishing. Why then the move to teaching? Was there someone or something that particularly inspired you into the profession?

A I have always loved literature and writing, and I was passionate about sharing this with young people. During my time in publishing, I particularly enjoyed working with students on placements, supporting them, teaching them, and seeing their confidence grow. That experience stayed with me. Teaching also runs in my family, both my grandmother and great-aunt were teachers, so in many ways it felt like a natural path. It offered the opportunity to combine my love of language with a sense of social purpose and impact.

Q Since your move into teaching, you have had a range of experience including playing a part in the founding of the Senior School at St Edmund's School in Hindhead, Surrey. What lessons have you learned from that experience that could be useful for others thinking about a similar expansion?

A The most important lesson is to remain relentlessly child centred. Successful expansion is not just about buildings or structure; it is about creating an environment where pupils can thrive. That means balancing strong academic outcomes with exceptional pastoral care and a rich co-curricular offer. It is also vital to bring parents into that journey. When families feel part of the community, it creates a powerful sense of belonging that underpins long term success.

Q You became head at Holme Grange last September, taking over from someone who had been in post for 16 years. How did you balance any need for change with the desire for continuity?

A My starting point was listening and taking time to understand what makes Holme Grange so special. There was a strong foundation already in place, and it was important to respect and preserve that. At the same time, I have been clear about where we can evolve and grow. Change has been

thoughtful and purposeful rather than reactive, and always rooted in our values. Building trust with staff, pupils, and parents has been central, and I am proud of the momentum we have already established as we look ahead.

Q The Holme Grange motto is to "Work Hard – Play Fair." Is this also a neat summary of your philosophy of building character while achieving academic excellence?

A Work Hard speaks to effort, resilience and the belief that progress comes through commitment. We actively recognise and reward effort because it builds confidence and long-term success. Play Fair reflects integrity, kindness and character. That balance between achievement and personal development is at the heart of everything we do. It is something that stays with pupils long after they leave and we even have a parent who proudly displays the motto on his car.

Q You believe leadership is about service, empathy and contributing positively to the wider community. How do you incorporate this in your day-to-day running of the school?

A For me, leadership is fundamentally about service. That means being visible, approachable, and listening carefully before making decisions. It also means supporting staff so they can do their best work, and ensuring pupils feel heard and valued. We actively encourage pupil voice and create opportunities for everyone to contribute to the life of the school. By modelling empathy, integrity, and respect in our daily interactions, we build a culture where those values are lived, not just spoken.

Q Your background is as an English teacher, and one of your passions is creative writing. With a 2025 report finding that just over half of UK published novelists believe that AI is likely to replace their work as fiction writers are you concerned about pupil use of AI in the context of creative writing? How can this be combatted?

Pippa Adams is Head at Holme Grange School, Berkshire. She was previously Deputy Head at Farlington School, West Sussex.



A AI presents both exciting opportunities and important challenges. At Holme Grange, we are embracing its potential while ensuring pupils are taught to use it ethically and responsibly. As someone passionate about writing, I see creativity as deeply human. AI can support, but not replace that. Our focus is on developing digital literacy, critical thinking, and strong values, so pupils are equipped to navigate this evolving landscape with confidence and integrity.

Q Holme Grange has a partnership with the Global School Alliance which has recently seen you welcome students from Japan. How does this collaboration work and what benefits arise for your pupils?

A Our partnership with the Global School Alliance has been incredibly rewarding. We have welcomed students from Japan and also had the opportunity to visit, which makes the relationship genuinely reciprocal. It is about far more than a single exchange; it is about building meaningful connections and giving pupils first-hand experience of another culture. These experiences broaden horizons, develop confidence, and strengthen communication skills. Ultimately, they help pupils become globally aware, curious, and respectful young people.

Q Your predecessor embedded environmental awareness at the heart of school culture. How are you continuing and developing that policy?

A Sustainability was already deeply embedded – we recently won the ISA Award for Excellence in Sustainability, so my focus has been on making it even more visible and practical in daily school life. This includes pupil-led initiatives, making greater use of our outdoor spaces and continuing to develop our Farm School. What matters most is giving pupils a sense of ownership. When they lead, the impact is far greater. It is about ensuring sustainability remains active, relevant, and something the whole community feels part of.

Q Holme Grange has produced 10,000 meals under the "Surplus to Purpose" initiative, using food that would have otherwise gone to waste. This initiative makes a meaningful contribution to local charities and highlights the importance of reducing food waste. How does it work in practice? Is it something you would recommend to other schools?

A It is a wonderfully simple but powerful idea, taking surplus food and transforming it into meals for local charities. Reaching 10,000 meals is a remarkable achievement and reflects a real commitment across the school. Beyond the practical impact, it teaches pupils an

important lesson that small, thoughtful actions can make a meaningful difference. It is absolutely something I would encourage other schools to explore.

Q As part of its outdoor learning offer, Holme Grange has a school farm, which you mentioned earlier. What are the opportunities offered from having this facility and why is it important?

A Our Farm School is a very special part of Holme Grange. It provides hands-on learning, helping pupils develop responsibility, confidence, and a real understanding of the natural world. Alongside this, our BTEC Animal Care course offers a clear pathway for those interested in this area, with many pupils progressing into related fields such as veterinary science. It is a powerful example of how education can be both practical and transformative.

Q And finally, as a busy head, what do you like to do in your spare time to switch off and relax?

A I enjoy reading, walking the dog and spending time with family and friends. I also love to travel with my family. Last summer I took a road trip from Seattle to Colorado, including Yellowstone National Park, which was unforgettable. I am very much looking forward to my first visit to Japan soon, which promises to be another exciting adventure.



A new era for allergy management in schools



Making a real difference

Allergy Awareness Week 2026 arrives at a defining moment for schools. With an estimated 20% of severe allergic reactions occurring in school settings, it highlights the ongoing need to keep every pupil safe, whatever their medical needs may be¹. This year also marks a major shift, new statutory guidance led by the Benedict Blythe Foundation, introduces the first clear legal framework for managing food allergy in schools.

Benedict's Law

In March 2026, the Department for Education announced landmark reforms that will take effect from September 2026, creating the first mandatory allergy safety standards for all schools in England². Named in memory of Benedict Blythe, who died aged five following a severe allergic reaction at school, Benedict's Law represents a significant step forward in aligning allergy management with wider safeguarding responsibilities.

Under the new guidance, schools must:

- Publish a standalone allergy policy
- Maintain spare emergency adrenaline auto-injectors (AAIs) on site
- Ensure all staff receive allergy and anaphylaxis training
- Strengthen incident reporting and learning procedures
- Provide Individual Healthcare Plans (IHPs) for all allergic pupils

The Whole-School Risk

Between 2–5% of UK children have a diagnosed food allergy, meaning almost every class includes at least one pupil at risk¹. Exposure is not limited to dining halls or lunchtime. According to the Food Standards Agency, pupils may encounter allergens during³:

- Sharing of packed lunches
- Classroom cooking, science experiments or craft activities
- Celebrations, bake sales and charity events

- After-school clubs and sports fixtures
- Snack breaks or reward activities

The risk extends beyond physical exposure. Thirty two percent of allergic pupils report being bullied because of their allergy, highlighting the emotional and social dimensions of effective allergy management. A whole school approach is therefore essential, one that reaches far beyond catering and lunchtime supervision.

Foundations of Allergy Safe Practice

While Benedict's Law introduces a regulatory framework, many existing good practices remain central to keeping pupils safe. Key components include⁴⁻⁶:

1. Clear identification and documentation

Effective systems typically include:

- Verified diagnoses
- Individual Healthcare Plans
- Allergy Action Plans
- Photo based identification
- Annual reviews

The Model Policy for Allergy at School, developed by Anaphylaxis UK, encourages schools to keep this information accessible and routinely updated¹.

2. Strong communication with families

Regular dialogue builds trust and ensures shared understanding of triggers, symptoms, and emergency procedures. This is especially important during

transitions between year groups or when staff change. Catering teams should be included in these conversations, particularly when there is new catering staff or management. Ensuring pupils are included and receive the support they need to navigate food options safely remains essential.

3. Robust catering procedures

Schools must understand and identify the 14 major allergens, check ingredient substitutions and follow labelling requirements such as Natasha's Law (2021)⁷. Catering teams should have regular training and follow protocols for managing identified medical diets. This requires the strict management of foods from delivery into the kitchen, storage, preparation, cooking, through to service. The School Food People's (formerly known as LACA) Allergen Management Guidance for Catering in Education provides detailed advice on food preparation, segregated equipment and safe food storage⁸.

Preparing for September 2026

A range of programmes and training initiatives can support schools as they strengthen their allergy policies. The Schools Allergy Code, created by The Allergy Team and the Benedict Blythe Foundation, offers clear recommendations such as appointing a designated allergy lead, running regular emergency drills, providing annual staff training, and fostering a culture that challenges stigma⁸. Schools may also join the Schools Allergy Register, offering families visible

reassurance that best practice is being followed.

As the implementation date approaches, schools can begin by reviewing existing policies to ensure they are clearly signposted and easy for staff to follow. Key preparation steps include:

- Auditing current training levels and planning refreshers
- Embedding allergy training into induction and ongoing professional development
- Establishing systems for spare AAIs, including storage, access and staff responsibilities
- Improving consistency in information sharing with catering teams, supply teachers, lunchtime supervisors, and extracurricular providers
- Strengthening incident response procedures and running regular emergency drills

These steps help build staff confidence and reduce anxiety around managing allergic reactions.

Looking Ahead

The 2026 reforms represent a major advance in allergy safeguarding. With clearer expectations, mandatory training and stronger emergency preparedness, schools will be better equipped than ever to protect pupils with food allergies. Embedding these practices will help ensure that every child can learn, play, and thrive in a safe and inclusive environment.

1. Model Policy for Allergy at School. Anaphylaxis UK, Allergy UK, BSACI; 2024. [Model-Poli...2.1-090124 | PDF]
 2. Department for Education. Stronger protections for children with allergies in school; 2026. [Allergen g... caterers | PDF]
 3. Food Standards Agency. Allergen guidance for institutional caterers; 2025.
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Helping children handle difficult news: speaking to children about the conflict in the Middle East

Former teacher and founder of an educational current affairs resource for schools, Katie Harrison, offers some practical advice on how to approach talking to pupils about the conflict ongoing in the Middle East, and shares how it can offer perhaps unexpected learning opportunities.

We have to juggle a lot as educators, from lesson planning and delivery, marking and assemblies, to solving breaktime fall-outs. But one role that perhaps doesn't always spring to mind first is helping children handle difficult news – in recent times, the conflict in the Middle East. As a media literacy advocate, I'm here to show you this doesn't have to be a dreaded task. Instead, these moments can pose – perhaps quite unexpected – learning opportunities. So, let's explore what talking to children in school about conflict in the Middle East can look like.

Your impact

Firstly, before any assembly or classroom discussion about the Middle East, remember how influential you are as a teacher, in modelling behaviour, language, and reactions. Children can be so impressionable, therefore your approach to the topic can impact how the conversation goes. So, keep calm and be yourself – children will know if things are “off” and sense (and potentially mirror) stress or fear. Be open and honest, acknowledging some people in the Middle East are having a difficult time because of political disagreements and conflict, but ultimately, reassure children that lots of people and organisations are working hard to find solutions and help the people affected.

Small groups

You know your pupils best,

so it may be that to address the conflict, you hold smaller group conversations with pupils who are affected, whether they have personal connections or are particularly worried by the news. Create a respectful space to talk, letting the children lead the conversations and ask any questions, even if that means holding more than one discussion. This can help alleviate their fears and build their trust in you, as someone who can help them to feel safe, seen, and heard. It's this compassion that's at the centre of our teaching, isn't it!

Teacher tools

Think about the timing of conversations. Where you can, try to stick to mornings, as this enables children to reflect, digest, and come back to you later in the day with any further questions or concerns, rather than going home with unaddressed thoughts. It's common for children to sometimes bottle up how they truly feel, so within smaller groups or one-to-one conversations, try various techniques that resonate to facilitate emotional expression. Each child will respond differently – some may prefer to talk alone or with others, some may respond well to smiley faces and emotion grids, while others may prefer creative outlets such as art or poems to work through their thoughts. Aligning with your overall approach, it's important for the tone to be

practical and reassuring throughout, noticing and diffusing worries when they arise, and maintaining a calm environment.

Themes to explore

Addressing conflict in the Middle East could become the basis of differentiated key stage assemblies. Consider the level of detail you want to share based on the children's age and developmental stage, avoiding graphic details, political debate, or sharing images of conflict. Try to centre your focus on broader themes of disagreements or fairness, for example. And, within every sensitive issue, are glimmers of humanity. For instance, you could highlight aid workers, what it takes to support people through difficult moments, or explore initiatives closer to home which aim to reassure people affected. This way, you're not shying away from tricky conversations, you're offering clear examples which emphasise resilience and compassion – traits to be inspired by and emulate, despite the complexities of the ever-changing world.

At home

Consider action beyond the school gates too. Think about parent/carer communications, whether it's a letter sent home or a chat in the playground with parents of children who are particularly affected. As ever, maintain open dialogue with parents and carers, staying transparent by informing them of your discussions of events



Katie Harrison

in the Middle East. Current affairs and news of conflict can provoke a range of emotions for all of us, so to support the discussions you've had in school, encourage respect and calm amongst your wider school community, reminding parents of the influence they have if continuing conversations about the Middle East at home. In challenging times, promoting community, conversation and teamwork between teachers and parents can make all the difference.

Be comforted by the fact it's not unusual to initially feel overwhelmed or unsure about addressing news stories about war and conflict with children. You know your pupils best, so trust yourself as an educator (and human!) as you navigate conversations with them about what's happening. Listen, be open, and make room for emotional expression with reassurance at the core. News doesn't have to be off-limits for children, and often, it's in the moments of hardship and uncertainty that children can illuminate the world with hope and resilience – they just need the right tools and support to get there, and that can be from you!

Katie Harrison is a former teacher and founder of Picture News, which provides schools with resources to create engaging and exciting lessons about current affairs, providing opportunities for children to learn about the world around them, <https://picture-news.co.uk>

From classroom to bookshelf

Milton Abbey School, Dorset, is celebrating after having not one but two published authors amongst its teaching staff. Along with 'The Milton Abbey Story – An Illustrated History', written and illustrated by Design and Creative Media teacher, James Ratcliffe, Daisy Fitzgerald from the Learning Development team, has also had

her debut children's book, 'My Dog Floki', published.

Ms Fitzgerald, who joined the Learning Development team in September 2025, is a lifelong lover of children's literature. Her book, which was inspired by her own New Zealand Huntaway, Floki, follows the friendly and energetic dog as he explores woods, fields,

and babbling brooks, all the while dreaming of making friends with the birds he meets along the way. The idea for the book grew from Ms Fitzgerald's countryside walks with her dog.

The book is now available through Pegasus Publishers, as well as online retailers including Amazon, Waterstones, and World of Books.



Daisy Fitzgerald

Ask the expert:

How can independent schools take control in a volatile energy market?

For independent schools, keeping energy costs under control is never straightforward. Between sprawling historic buildings, modern sports facilities, and energy-hungry boarding houses, balancing the budget can feel like a juggling act. Now, recent tensions in the Middle East have added another layer of uncertainty, causing short-term spikes in gas and electricity prices.

Alex Payne, Director of Energy Markets & Procurement at Zenergi, explains what's happening in the energy markets, why UK schools are affected, and how schools can approach their 2026 energy contract renewals with confidence.



Alex Payne

Understanding the volatility

The current turbulence stems from conflicts involving the US, Israel, and Iran, centred around the Strait of Hormuz – a vital shipping route through which around 20% of the world's oil and a significant portion of liquefied natural gas (LNG) pass. Recent attacks on ships and temporary production pauses in Qatar have disrupted these flows, particularly affecting Asia.

UK schools may not source energy directly from this region, but global energy markets are tightly linked. Any disruption can ripple across continents, pushing prices up even here in the UK.

Why UK prices move

Several factors drive UK energy costs:

- LNG supply concerns: Europe has increasingly relied on LNG since Russian gas supplies have declined. Disruptions anywhere influence prices across the continent.

- Oil price correlation: Gas prices remain partially linked to oil, so rising oil costs often translate into higher gas bills.
- Market risk premiums: Traders factor in extra costs during uncertain times, even without a supply shortage.
- Electricity pricing: Gas-fired power stations often set electricity costs, meaning higher gas costs can raise school electricity bills.

Is this another 2022 crisis?

Not quite. Europe's energy system is now more resilient, with greater LNG supply options, particularly from the US, and improved storage capacity. While short-term price spikes are possible, schools are less exposed to the extreme swings seen in 2022.

Practical guidance for 2026 contracts

The best approach is measured, not reactive. Prices may be elevated,

but underlying supply remains stable. Key points for schools:

- Markets often move faster than actual supply changes.
- Geopolitical spikes can subside quickly.
- Locking in a contract at a peak can be costly over the long term.

Timing and strategy

- **Near-term renewals (April–October 2026):** Prices are higher than a month ago, but we are still seeing opportunities to achieve prices that are not dissimilar to recent years, especially for longer term deals. Securing a contract now can provide certainty for budgets.
- **Later renewals (October 2026 onwards):** Waiting could be advantageous if tensions ease. However, we recommend testing the market now, as the rates

available may still fall within your budget.

- **Flexible contracts:** These spread purchases over time, reducing the risk of locking in during price spikes.

Bottom line

Stay informed. Avoid reacting quickly to headlines and align decisions with your school's risk tolerance and budget. Longer-term contracts or flexible purchasing strategies can help mitigate volatility. With the European energy system stronger than in 2022, schools can navigate the market with confidence and avoid overpaying.

Zenergi supports schools through energy market uncertainty, helping them make strategic, cost-effective choices. Scan the QR code to get in touch or access market updates.

About the expert

Alex Payne manages an experienced team responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of procurement strategies that secure the best value for schools.

zenergi⁰

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Music, Drama, & Dance

Conservatoire-in-residence partnership



Dauntsey's, Wiltshire, has announced a new partnership with the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama (RWCMD), which will become the school's conservatoire-in-residence from Spring 2026.

The collaboration aims to inspire and support young people interested in the arts, whether on stage or behind the scenes, and to raise awareness of the diverse career pathways available within the cultural and creative industries.

The programme will offer pupils access to specialist mentoring, performance support, workshops, and opportunities to visit RWCMD

Pictured: Music at Dauntsey's

and engage with its staff and students.

Director of Open RWCMD, Kevin Price, said: "We want young people to understand that their passions and talents can lead to fulfilling futures. Many students may not be aware of the range of opportunities available within the arts, or have the contacts they need to explore them. We are excited to develop our partnership with Dauntsey's through mentoring sessions, performance support from RWCMD students, and opportunities for Dauntsey's pupils to attend performances, take part in workshops and meet RWCMD staff."

'Sister Act The Musical'

Pupils from Ashville College, North Yorkshire, have performed to audiences of over 1,000 people across four shows with their production of 'Sister Act The Musical'.

Over 70 pupils from Ashville, representing Years 7 to 13, performed in two casts.

Having been a favourite on the amateur theatre circuit for over a decade, 'Sister Act The Musical' is based on the 1992 film starring Whoopi Goldberg and the late Dame Maggie Smith, and follows the story of Deloris

Van Cartier, a lounge singer whose life takes an unexpected turn after witnessing a crime committed by her boyfriend, Curtis.

To protect her, Deloris is placed in a convent under witness protection, where she struggles to adapt to the strict rules – until her musical talents breathe new life into the convent choir, bringing joy, laughter, and a touch of showbiz to the sisters' otherwise quiet lives.

The production culminated in the finale 'Spread the Love,' bringing the entire cast together in a celebratory end to the evening.

Next stop for the school's performers will see a group of pupils and Old Ashvillians taking a production this summer to the Edinburgh Fringe.



Performing 'Sister Act The Musical'



Dance showcase

Student dancers from Milton Abbey School, Dorset, have put on an originally choreographed performance at a dance event held in Bournemouth.

The Origins dance event, presented in partnership with Pavilion Dance South West, is a celebration of creativity and emerging young talent, and offers youth dancers an

opportunity to perform on a professional stage.

The day itself included activities such as a workshop led by a professional dancer, a talk exploring the science behind dance, as well as studio rehearsals, technical preparations, and dress runs, all building towards the final performance.

Pictured: The dancers from Milton Abbey School
Photo credit: Milton Abbey School

Digital piano programme



A new programme of piano tuition has been launched in the Preparatory Division at New Hall School, Essex, giving all pupils in Years 3 and 4 the opportunity to learn the piano as part of their weekly curriculum. As part of the programme, each class receives one hour of piano tuition a week, ensuring that all pupils can participate and develop their musical skills together.

The programme uses a suite of Yamaha digital pianos with weighted keys, complete with adjustable stools and pedals. This set-up provides pupils with an authentic piano experience, distinguishing it from learning on a standard keyboard. By working with weighted keys and pedals from the outset, pupils develop correct posture, touch, and technique, laying a strong foundation for future musical study.

Pictured: Digital piano tuition in action

Director of Music, Mr Jonathan Turner, said: "We are delighted to introduce a programme that enables all pupils to learn on weighted instruments, developing strong technique and musicianship in an engaging and inclusive way. The cognitive benefits of learning an instrument are well established, and we see this programme as an important driver of wider academic progress. By enhancing focus, resilience and independent thinking, it will no doubt support higher attainment across the curriculum while enriching every pupil's musical experience."

The initiative complements the school's wider Musical Instrumental Scheme, through which pupils in Year 3 have the opportunity to try six different instruments before choosing one to specialise in during Year 4.

A season of extraordinary success: elevating school outcomes through strategic partnerships

The 2026 admissions cycle has been a landmark year, defined by the breathtaking ambition and success of pupils across the UK. Yet, behind these celebrations lies an undeniable truth: the landscape has never been more competitive. Many schools have felt the sting of unexpected rejections for pupils who, in previous cycles, would have been considered certainties. This volatility further confirms that academic excellence, while a necessity, is not a guarantee of entry to the global elite.

We have observed a significant evolution in what constitutes a winning profile, particularly regarding the weight of

extracurricular engagement. For Oxbridge and the UK's top ten, the focus has shifted sharply toward supercurricular depth, as demonstrated by the recent change in personal statement prompts requiring more structured evidence of intellectual curiosity. Simultaneously, the bar for the Ivy League and top US colleges has been raised to unprecedented heights. The Common App has evolved to reflect this; additional sections now include a dedicated space for research with video questions to prove the validity of a student's work.



Independent schools are intensely interested in constantly improving their university acceptance rates, as this is an increasingly prominent focus for parents. The way to achieve this is by integrating the niche expertise of former admissions officers and specialist mentors to provide a bespoke layer of support. This ensures that whether a pupil is navigating the nuances


of an Oxbridge interview or the multifaceted requirements of a Harvard application, they possess a definitive competitive edge.

Crimson are thrilled to celebrate our students' extraordinary achievements from this current cycle so far: 293 offers to the Ivy League (including 75 to UPenn), 61 to Oxbridge, 736 to the top 20 US, and 690 to the top ten UK institutions.



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3,714	4,250
<small>Offers to the US Top 20 universities</small>	<small>Offers to the UK Top 10 universities</small>



★ ★ ★ ★ ★





Shakespeare Festival

Solihull School, West Midlands, has hosted its second Shakespeare Festival, welcoming academics, performers, and students from over 20 schools nationwide for a day celebrating the works of William Shakespeare.

The festival brought together speakers from the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, alongside the Shakespeare Institute. Highlights included an address from Professor Michael Dobson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute, exploring the modern relevance of Shakespearean tragedy, including performances of 'Hamlet' in contemporary Ukraine.

The programme also featured talks from Dr Sophie Duncan of Magdalen College, Oxford, Professor Simon Palfrey of Brasenose College, Oxford, Dr Sophie Read of Christ's College, Cambridge, Professor Tiffany Stern of the Shakespeare Institute, and Professor Emma Smith of Hertford College, Oxford.

Pictured: Solihull School Head, Charles Fillingham, with Head of English, Dr Stuart Hart



Solihull Head of English, Dr Stuart Hart, said: "The Shakespeare Festival offers a wonderful opportunity for A Level students to enrich their critical appreciation of the bard and his stagecraft through attending a number of talks by some of the world's most eminent Shakespearean scholars."

The festival concluded with an evening performance of 'Much Ado About Nothing', introduced by theatre director, and Old Silhillian, Richard Digby Day and performed by the Oxford's Jesus College Shakespeare Project in the school chapel.

Tomorrow's Women Conference

Former DCI and Traitors contestant, Amanda Collier, joined a panel of female leaders at Burgess Hill Girls, West Sussex, last month, as students from the school took the reins on the annual Tomorrow's Women Conference for 2026.

Amanda Collier, who spent 29 years leading major investigations before stepping onto a TV set, shared insights into resilience, risk taking and being prepared to redefine ones career path. She was joined by, Ellie Bishop Williams of Project Female UK, a youth arts organisation that uses dance as a platform for empowerment, confidence, and creative expression; Julie Kapsalis MBE, CEO and Principal of NEScot; and Flo Powell, Joint Managing Director of Midnight PR, who are supporters of The Girls' Network.

This year's conference theme, "Give to Gain," shaped conversations about collaboration, confidence, and practical advice about being a woman in the workplace.



and the importance of seizing opportunities; saying yes to any that are presented.

The event is organised and delivered entirely by students in the Lower Sixth as part of their leadership development. The audience was made up of Year 10 students, including girls from other local schools, including; Burgess Hill Academy, Chailey School, Oathall Community College, and Davison High School. This year saw a new podcast style format, where student hosts led open discussions that encouraged honesty, humour, and practical advice about being a woman in the workplace.

Pictured: The Tomorrow's Women Conference

Advertorial Feature

Rethinking school spaces with bespoke classroom furniture

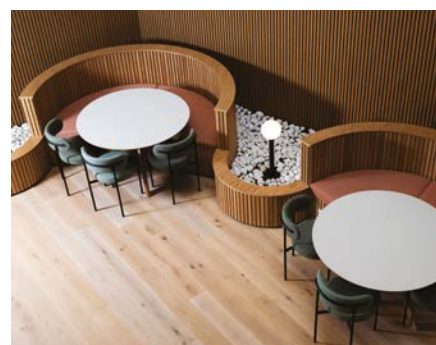
Too often, school furniture is seen as a practical necessity, something to fill a room rather than shape it. But this mindset overlooks a significant opportunity. Bespoke classroom furniture is not just about function; it's about rethinking how spaces can better support learning, identity, and experience.

When schools move beyond off-the-shelf solutions, they gain the ability to design with intention. Bespoke furniture allows each piece to respond directly to its environment, whether that means fitting seamlessly into an awkward corner, supporting multiple teaching styles, or reinforcing a school's visual identity. The result

is not just a more efficient use of space, but a more considered one.

There is also growing value in involving students in the design process. Asking for their input, how they learn best, what inspires them, how they use space, can lead to environments that feel more engaging and relevant. A student-informed breakout area or reading space, for example, is more likely to be used, respected, and remembered.

In schools with distinctive architecture, bespoke design becomes even more important. Period buildings and listed properties often come with constraints, but they also offer character. Thoughtfully designed furniture can work with these features rather than against them,



balancing modern educational needs with heritage surroundings.

Equally, bespoke furniture can help highlight a school's strengths. Whether it's tailored storage for a busy music department or specialist workspaces for STEM learning, these environments can be designed to both support and showcase what a school does best.

Ultimately, bespoke classroom furniture invites schools to think differently, not just about what fills a space, but about what that space can become.



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MiDAS Accessible training: a commitment to safeguarding, inclusion, and respect

The Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme (MiDAS) is widely recognised as the national standard for minibus driver training. However, for independent schools transporting students with additional needs, completing the MiDAS Accessible modules will elevate transport provision from compliant to exemplary.

Designed specifically to support the safe and dignified transportation of passengers with disabilities, including wheelchair users and those with both visible and hidden conditions, MiDAS Accessible training goes far beyond the basics.

Why accessible transport matters

For students with reduced mobility or additional needs, the journey to and from school is a fundamental part of their daily experience. When handled well, it supports independence, confidence, and wellbeing. When handled poorly, it can undermine all three.

James Howe, a Driver Assessor delivering MiDAS (standard and accessible) and passenger assistant training for Rivervale Minibus, the CTA, and other organisations, explains:

“They are carrying pupils on your minibus who need extra dedication and care – and safety needs to be the priority for everyone.”

MiDAS vs MiDAS Accessible: What's the difference?

While standard MiDAS focuses on safe driving, MiDAS Accessible builds on this with specialist knowledge and practical skills.

As James outlines:

“MiDAS standard is the driving element... you complete online modules and then a practical driving assessment to ensure your driving is safe, legal, and comfortable.

MiDAS Accessible offers additional online modules and practical training with emphasis on wheelchair access, and the dignified transportation of anyone with visible or hidden disabilities.”

This includes critical training in the correct use of WTORS (Wheelchair Tie-Down and Occupant Restraint Systems) ensuring both the wheelchair and the passenger are safely secured.

Safety: What schools often miss

Transporting less mobile students introduces risks that standard driver training simply does not cover.

MiDAS Accessible addresses essential areas such as:

- Safe operation of wheelchair lifts and ramps
- Correct securing of wheelchairs and passengers
- Risk assessment during boarding and alighting
- Emergency awareness and best practice

Without this training, even experienced staff can make dangerous mistakes.

James highlights a common, and serious issue:

“Many schools don't realise that the cant rails in their minibuses are there to secure a shoulder strap for wheelchair passengers... This keeps the passenger in their chair and stops their body jack-knifing in a collision.”

He adds: “There has been, over the years, quite a lot of fatalities involving wheelchairs on board vehicles... It can be a difficult and dangerous job to do without any training at all.”

Dangerous misconceptions

One of the biggest risks comes from the assumption that wheelchair transportation is easy.

“It's common to think transporting somebody in a wheelchair is easy... that operating the equipment is as simple as just two buttons. But actually, it's a lot more than that,” says James.

In reality, accessible transport requires time, care, and a high level of awareness – not just of equipment, but of people.

“You need to make sure that you're addressing the individual as a human being... telling them what you are doing, asking them questions, and not making assumptions about their capabilities.”

Dignity: As important as safety

A key strength of MiDAS Accessible is its emphasis on dignity – not just safety and compliance.

Students with mobility challenges or hidden disabilities can be particularly vulnerable to feeling:

- Singled out
- Dependent
- Like a burden

The training reinforces principles such as:

- Respectful communication
- Promoting independence wherever possible
- Maintaining privacy and personal space
- Understanding the emotional impact of assistance

As James puts it:

“You need to give your passengers agency... the job that you're doing is very important and can have a huge impact on their day.”

Building confidence in staff and systems

Training doesn't just protect students – it empowers staff. Those who complete MiDAS Accessible modules are going to be more confident in using equipment, more

prepared for any issues they may face and are far less likely to make mistakes under pressure.

This can only lead to smoother transport operations with a reduction in stress for drivers, staff, and students and essentially a more professional and consistent standard of care.

Reassurance for parents

For parents of children with additional needs, transport is often one of the greatest concerns. Knowing that drivers and passenger assistants are fully MiDAS Accessible trained provides reassurance that their child is safe and will be treated with dignity and respect, so that their school day will not be affected by a stressful or upsetting journey.

More than training – a statement of values

There are many reasons for independent schools to adopt MiDAS Accessible training:

- Strengthened safeguarding and duty of care
- Improved safety outcomes
- Enhanced staff confidence and professionalism
- Greater inclusion in practice – not just policy
- Increased trust from parents and guardians

Completing the additional MiDAS Accessible modules ensures that less mobile students are not only transported safely – but are treated with the dignity, respect, and care they deserve. Every journey becomes an extension of the school's commitment to inclusion, and for the students who rely on it, that makes all the difference.

For more information on MiDAS and MiDAS Accessible training visit: rivervaleminibus.co.uk, call: 01869 253744, or email: minibus@rivervale.co.uk

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Rethinking the start of GCSEs: why Year 9 matters more than we sometimes admit

Across the independent sector, the question of when the GCSE journey should begin continues to resurface. Assistant Head (Teaching and Learning) at Mount Kelly, Devon, Alan Johnson, ponders whether Year 9 should be best understood as the start of GCSEs, or as the culmination of Key Stage 3.

For some schools, starting GCSE courses in Year 9 is seen as a pragmatic response to content heavy specifications or a desire to reduce pressure in Year 11. For others, it raises concerns about curriculum narrowing and premature specialisation.

At Mount Kelly, this debate is shaped by two defining features of our context: our Thinking Schools accreditation and the significant transition pupils experience when moving from Prep to College in Year 9. Together, these prompt a more fundamental question – is Year 9 best understood as the start of GCSEs, or as the culmination of Key Stage 3 (KS3)?

The national picture – and its limitations

Statutorily, KS3 runs from Years 7 to 9, with Key Stage 4 beginning in Year 10. The Department for Education (DfE) is clear that KS3 should provide a broad, balanced and ambitious curriculum, designed to promote pupils' intellectual, cultural and personal development¹. While academies and independent schools have flexibility in how this is structured, the principle of breadth remains central.

Despite this, many schools nationally have compressed KS3 in order to begin GCSE study earlier. However, evidence for the effectiveness of this approach is limited. Research commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) found no secure causal link between a three

year GCSE model and improved outcomes at age 16². The study cautions against assuming that increased curriculum time alone leads to higher attainment, noting instead that outcomes are shaped by multiple interacting factors.

For independent schools, often less constrained by performance measures, this raises an important question – if early GCSE entry does not reliably improve outcomes, what might be lost by adopting it?

Thinking Schools and the purpose of Key Stage 3

Mount Kelly's Thinking Schools accreditation commits the school to the explicit teaching of metacognition, cognitive strategies, and dispositions for learning. Within this framework, KS3 is not simply preparatory but formative. It is the phase in which pupils learn how to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning, and how to transfer thinking across disciplines. Moreover, the issue of variance in maturity rates of pupils at this age could have a significant impact on learning outcomes. Research into adolescent cognitive development suggests that KS3 is marked by substantial variability in executive function and self regulatory maturity, such that pupils of the same chronological age may differ markedly in their readiness for abstract and high stakes academic learning^{3,4}.

Evidence strongly supports this emphasis. The EEF identifies

metacognitive and self regulatory strategies as among the most effective approaches for improving attainment⁵. Similarly, Visible Learning research places metacognition, feedback and teacher clarity well above the average "hinge point" for impact⁶. Crucially, these strategies are most powerful when pupils are given time to practise them in low stakes contexts, before the demands of public examinations intensify⁴.

From this perspective, compressing KS3 risks undermining precisely the cognitive foundations upon which successful GCSE study depends.

Year 9 as a transition year

For Mount Kelly pupils, Year 9 represents a significant educational transition, as they move from Prep into the College. This involves not only new academic expectations, but changes in scale, routines, relationships, and independence.

Research from the Chartered College of Teaching highlights that transitions already place substantial cognitive and emotional demands on pupils, and that KS3 is most effective when it is treated as a distinct and purposeful phase, rather than a truncated prelude to GCSEs⁷. Introducing GCSE level content at the same time as a major institutional transition risks overloading pupils at a point when security, clarity and consistency are particularly important.

Visible Learning research reinforces the importance of teacher

clarity and feedback during such periods, suggesting that the priority should be consolidation and understanding, rather than acceleration⁶.

Curriculum breadth and educational identity

One of the most consistent risks associated with early GCSE entry is curriculum narrowing, particularly in creative, practical and enrichment subjects. The DfE's national curriculum framework makes clear that KS3 entitlement includes the arts, humanities, languages and physical education, not simply those subjects that later count towards performance measures¹.

For independent schools, where breadth and holistic education often form a core part of institutional identity, this narrowing is not a neutral trade off. Year 9 can be a critical period for intellectual discovery, allowing pupils to encounter subjects in new ways and develop emerging interests. Reducing this exploratory space risks limiting both cultural capital and cognitive development, particularly for pupils whose strengths emerge later.

What really improves outcomes?

Across research syntheses, a consistent message emerges: pedagogical quality matters more than curriculum structure. The EEF emphasises that improvements in teaching, feedback and curriculum coherence are more reliably associated with improved

1. Department for Education (DfE). National curriculum in England: Framework for key stages 1 to 4. London: DfE; 2014.

2. Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Investigating the length of the GCSE curriculum. London: EEF; 2023.

3. Blakemore, S. J. and Robbins, T.W. 'Decision making in the adolescent brain', *Nature Neuroscience*, 15(9), pp. 1184–1191; 2012. [https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.3177]

4. Diamond, A. 'Executive functions', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64, pp. 135–168; 2013. [https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750]

5. Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Metacognition and self regulated learning: Guidance report. London: EEF; 2018.

6. Hattie, J. *Visible Learning: The sequel*. London: Routledge; 2023.

7. Cook, V. Curriculum design at Key Stage 3: Supporting primary to secondary school transition. *Impact Article*. London: Chartered College of Teaching; 2025. [https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/curriculum-design-at-key-stage-3-supporting-primary-to-secondary-school-transition/].

8. Education Endowment Foundation. *A school's guide to implementation*. London: EEF; 2019.

9. Hattie, J. (2023) *Visible Learning: The sequel*. London: Routledge.



Alan Johnson

outcomes than structural changes such as extending courses^{2,8}.

Visible Learning research similarly suggests that additional time only becomes valuable when it is used to deepen understanding, not simply to rehearse examination technique⁶. From this standpoint, the key issue is not when GCSEs begin, but how well pupils are prepared for them.

A different question for independent schools

For schools such as Mount Kelly, the debate is therefore less about whether early GCSE entry can work in principle, and more about whether it aligns with local context, pupil development, and educational values.

Reframing the discussion away from “How early can GCSEs start?” towards “What foundations must be secure before GCSEs begin?” has proved more productive. Within a Thinking Schools framework, Year 9 is best understood as a year of cognitive consolidation, ensuring pupils enter Key Stage 4 as confident, self regulated learners⁹.

Conclusion

Beginning GCSEs in Year 9 is often presented as a pragmatic structural decision. In reality, it carries significant implications for curriculum breadth, pupil development, and school ethos. Current evidence offers no clear attainment advantage to early GCSE entry, while highlighting real risks associated with curriculum compression and transition overload^{2,7}.

At Mount Kelly, protecting Year 9 as part of a rich and purposeful KS3 is not resistance to change, but an evidence informed choice. It reflects a belief that thinking, not acceleration, remains the most reliable preparation for success.

Bridging STEM and music

A pupil from Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh, has designed an eco-friendly guitar that can switch between acoustic and electric sounds, allowing musicians to change tone without needing multiple instruments.

The design uses interchangeable components to alter the guitar’s sound, removing the need to buy multiple instruments and helping reduce material waste.

Chester, aged 19, began developing the idea after noticing how expensive it can be for musicians to own several guitars to achieve different sounds.

He designed a single instrument capable of producing multiple tones while also using more sustainable materials, including FSC-certified wood and water-based finishes. The design also allows parts to be repaired or replaced rather than the whole instrument being discarded, helping reduce waste.

Chester said: “The guitar’s most unique feature is a removable modular block which houses all of the electronics and pickups. Different pickups create different

Pictured: Chester with his guitar



tones, which is why musicians often need several guitars to achieve particular sounds. With this design, guitarists can swap components and customise the sound of the instrument, even mid-performance.”

Working on the prototype for more than a year, he experimented with a range of materials, from traditional timber to experimental resin, before refining the final design. The result is a fully functioning guitar that can be adapted for different styles of music.

Head of Faculty for Technologies and Creative Arts and Design Technology teacher at Merchiston

Castle School, Florence Chapman, said: “This is a brilliant example of how the disciplines within STEM can work together to complement one another in producing a single creative outcome. Chester has used knowledge from subjects like maths and physics alongside design and music to create something genuinely innovative. Projects like this show how pupils can take an idea, test it, refine it and turn it into something real.”

The guitar has already been tested by fellow pupils and teachers performing classic rock tracks in the school’s music department.

STEMFest

Royal Hospital School (RHS), Suffolk, has welcomed over 400 pupils from 14 schools for its 2026 STEMFest. The festival aimed to spark curiosity and demonstrate how STEM skills connect to future careers as the finale to a packed British Science week at RHS.

This year, STEMFest partnered with Sizewell C, giving pupils an insight into how STEM underpins major infrastructure projects and careers in the energy sector. Sizewell C’s Power Up programme, delivered by Skill Supply, was also onsite delivering a hands-on skills workshop while highlighting future careers linked to the Sizewell C project.

Pupils also took part in a wide range of interactive activities, from launching rocket balloons to coding Sphero robots, examining owl pellets with the Suffolk Owl Sanctuary, experimenting with nitrogen, piloting drones, using

Pictured: STEMFest at RHS

a hover board and exploring the universe inside the Wonderdome planetarium.

Outdoor sessions encouraged scientific observation, with pupils scanning the school tower to spot peregrine falcons and learn about wildlife monitoring, while indoor workshops explored careers and surveying equipment used in Civil Engineering and construction.

The festival also included an Immersive Pathways experience, using VR Headsets and the opportunity to look at careers, helping pupils understand how their classroom learning could translate into real-world STEM opportunities.

Teacher of DT, RHS STEM Lead & STEMFest Organiser, Beverly Maloney said: “#STEMFest 26 has been a fantastic celebration of curiosity, creativity, and real world STEM. From hands-on engineering experiences to



conversations with industry experts, all of the pupils involved have had the opportunity to embrace and explore how STEM shapes their world and how it can shape their future. I believe that creating events like this truly empower young people to see themselves as the next generation of innovators and problem solvers, and we’re incredibly proud of our own pupils and their enthusiasm throughout the week as STEMFest becomes the finale to a week of celebrating curiosity during British Science Week.”



National netball champions

The U16 girls team from Cheadle Hulme School, Cheshire, have been crowned England Netball National Champions following a final that was decided by a golden goal.

The CHS team faced Berkhamsted School, Hertfordshire, in the final, with the match level at full time and still tied after extra time. CHS then secured victory with a decisive goal to claim the national title.

Pictured: The winning U16s team

In recent weeks, the U14b and U16b also took their places in the Greater Manchester County Tournaments and the U13b team came third in Loughborough in the Sisters in Sport National Bowl competition.

The U14s also competed at the National Finals in Sheffield and finished fifth overall.



ISFA Trophy Final

The First XI Football Team from Bolton School Boys' Division, Lancashire have played in the national Under 18 ISFA (Independent Schools Football Association) Trophy Final.

The tournament for the First XI saw earlier wins against The Grammar School at Leeds, The Grange and Merchant Taylor's. In the semi-final, the Bolton boys beat Reading Blue Coat after a 0-0 draw, earning them their place in the Trophy Final.

A relatively young side, with only three Year 13 players on the team, Bolton School Boys' First XI faced opponents St John Leatherhead, Surrey in the final with St John

Pictured: Bolton School's goalkeeper in action in the final Photo credit: Adam Scott

Leatherhead winning 5-1.

Head of Boys' Division, Mr Nic Ford said: "I'm extremely proud of the boys for reaching the ISFA Trophy final, a magnificent achievement from a young squad. The cup run had it all, even a tense penalty shoot-out in the semi-finals, and the boys did themselves and the school proud in the final. Hopefully, we'll be back next year!"

The First XI has since signed off their season with an 8-3 win against Sandbach. Other notable wins this season were against the likes of Manchester Grammar School, Stockport Grammar School, and Rossall.



Educator of the Year (North) Award

Charlie Jackson, a coach from Westholme School, Lancashire, has been named inaugural national ISFA Educator of the Year (North) at the Independent Schools Football Association's Recognition Awards.

The award, recognises outstanding contribution to the development and growth of football within the independent school sector across England.

Charlie's honour came in the category, 'Educator of the Year - Growing Football in a Prep

Pictured: Peter McLean, CEO of the Independent Schools Football Association, presenting the award to Charlie Jackson, Westholme School Coach

School', where he was selected as the Northern Region winner.

At Westholme, Charlie has helped shape a culture where young players are encouraged to develop confidence, resilience, and a genuine love for the game.

Charlie said: "It's a huge honour to be recognised by ISFA. This reflects the work being done every day with the players and the support of Westholme, in building something special through their football excellence programme."

ISFA Team of the Year

Cokethorpe School, Oxfordshire, has been named Grounds Team of the Year 2026 by the Independent Schools Football Association (ISFA), recognising the quality, resilience and management of its football pitches.

The team of just three, led by Head Groundsman, Simon Hole, is responsible for maintaining a 150-acre site, including nine rugby pitches that convert into football pitches during the spring term.

Their work supports a busy football programme for boys and girls at the school, alongside use by around 36 community teams across the county.

Simon said: "We are incredibly proud to be recognised with this award. Managing and maintaining these grounds is a huge amount of work, but we take extra care in everything we do. It's the tiny details that make all the difference and ensure that every pitch looks and performs at its best."

The team works flexibly around fixtures, adapting to narrow weather windows and changing conditions.

"Everything we do is governed by the weather," Simon added. "You have to be flexible and make the most of every opportunity, especially when you're working around a busy school schedule."



Pictured: The Cokethorpe Grounds



Rugby 7s

The U16 squad from Glenalmond College, Perthshire, has won the Plate Final at the Rosslyn Park National Schools Sevens, defeating Canford School, Dorset, (22–5) in the final.

The U16s arrived at the tournament following strong performances in their pool stages, with victories over Leicester Grammar School, Leicestershire (49–12), Colfe's School, London (41–0), Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation (40–19), and Ysgol Gyfun Rhydywaun, Rhondda Cynon Taf (49–14).

In the eliminator stages a 5–12 defeat to Cheltenham College, Gloucestershire, was met with back-to-back victories over Aylesbury Grammar School, Buckinghamshire (36–5), and Emanuel School, London (35–17) which carried the

squad through to the semi-final stage. Two further victories against Bedford Modern School (31–17) and Bedford School (22–14) set up the Plate Final showdown.

The U16s' triumph was the centrepiece of a successful day for Glenalmond College rugby. The U18s won all four of their pool matches – defeating Ivybridge Community College, Devon (26–12), Hymers College, East Yorkshire (22–21), Howard of Effingham School, Surrey (26–12), and Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School, Kent (21–7) – before progressing to the knockout stages. The U14s, too, claimed victories over Ysgol Dyffryn Aman, Camarthanshire (26–22) and Dame Allan's Schools, Tyne and Wear (45–7).

Pictured: U16s Glenalmond team celebrating their win



County cricket champions

The U15 cricket team from Bolton School Girls' Division, Lancashire, after taking part at the ECB U15 Schools Indoor County Cricket Finals, are now Lancashire County Champions.

The team began by securing a 101–75 victory in their opening match against Turton. The second game against St Wilfred's saw Bolton narrowly fall short by just two runs, losing 82–84. In their third match against Manchester High School for

Girls, Bolton secured a 102–73 win.

Heading into the final group game against Bishop Rawstome, Bolton sealed a crucial 86–73 victory.

With all teams having lost one match, the final standings came down to run difference. In the end, Bolton School were crowned champions by just 9 runs!

They now go on to represent Lancashire at the Regional Finals later in the year.

Pictured: The Bolton School Girls' Division U15 cricket team
Photo credit: Bolton School Girls' Division



U18 Hockey & Rugby 7s tournament

More than 350 secondary pupils from across Scotland descended on Crieff for the Morrison's Academy annual Under 18s Hockey and Rugby 7s Tournament held at the Dunsire Sports Campus.

Now in its third year, the tournament saw teams compete throughout the afternoon in a series of group matches and knockout rounds. Taking part alongside the Perthshire hosts were teams from St Leonards School, Fife; Strathallan School, Perthshire; Robert Gordon's College, Aberdeen; Dollar Academy, Clackmannanshire; High School of Dundee, Angus;

Pictured: One of the U18 hockey matches Photo credit: Arwen Mo

The Glasgow Academy; St Aloysius' College, Glasgow; George Heriot's School, Edinburgh; Stewart's Melville College, Edinburgh; St Columba's School, Inverclyde; Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow; and Queen Victoria School, Perthshire.

After a series of closely contested fixtures, High School of Dundee lifted the Rugby cup, Dollar Academy were crowned hockey champions and the Rugby Plate went to Stewart's Melville College.

Plans are already underway for next year's event.



National title success

Surbiton High School, Surrey, is celebrating the end of the hockey season after success in the England Hockey Championships.

Three Surbiton High School teams secured national titles, with the U14 team being crowned Tier 1 National Champions after defeating

Repton, Derbyshire, 2–0 in the final. The U18 team also achieved national success, winning the Tier 1 Plate National Final with a 7–0 victory against St George's, Surrey. Completing the school's hat trick of titles, the U16 team won the Tier 1 Plate National Final with a 1–0 victory against Oakham, Rutland.

Pictured: The U16 Plate winners



Game on, whatever the weather

In an increasingly competitive sector, exceptional sports facilities are becoming a powerful differentiator. Schools that invest in high-quality sporting environments are not only attracting more pupils, but are also creating the conditions for confidence, resilience, and teamwork to excel.

That's why across the UK, we're seeing the most forward-thinking schools reimagining what year-round sport can look like. By investing in covered padel courts, cricket nets, and multi-use games areas, they're creating environments where sport and pupils can thrive every day of the year.

Five compelling reasons to join them...

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Covered sports courts enable your school to offer high-quality sporting experiences regardless of the season, instantly elevating your offering and speaking volumes about your school as a leader in every aspect of pupil development.

2. Build character through sport

Sport remains one of the most powerful ways for pupils to develop resilience, leadership,

communication skills, and teamwork. Year-round training, challenges, and competitions build confidence that extends far beyond the sports field.

3. Create a consistent sports programme

The British climate is renowned for disrupting outdoor sport and can do so for months at a time during bad winters. All-weather sports canopies allow training, lessons and matches to continue uninterrupted, helping teachers plan more effectively, pupils to build skills year-round, and your sports teams to excel.

4. Inspire new sporting passions

Exceptional facilities broaden horizons. From the fast-growing and exciting game of padel, to year-round cricket training nets, to multi-use games areas that support netball, basketball, football, and tennis, covered courts create a richer, more varied



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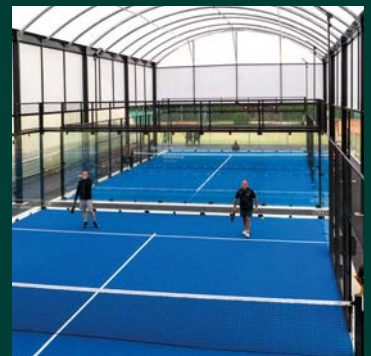
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Building culture and instilling values: a headteacher's perspective

How can schools build inclusive school cultures and instil values that will eventually become second nature to every student and staff member? Headteacher of Hall School Wimbledon (HSW), London, Jack Tyson, offers some thoughts on the approach they are taking to ensure that their values, based on kindness, belonging, curiosity, collaboration, and ambition, are visible, even in daily school life.

As leaders of independent schools, we know that culture shapes our pupils as much as academic results. However, a myriad of competing priorities can make it tempting to treat culture more like a branding exercise. Simply listing values on a website or poster does not truly reflect what our community stands for, because culture is not something written down. It comes from what we do, what we accept and what we celebrate every day. Put simply, it is “how we do things around here.”

So how can we build inclusive school cultures and instil values that eventually become second nature to every student and colleague?

Start with moral clarity

A strong school culture begins with clarity. Schools cannot uphold their values if colleagues and students struggle to explain them. The most outstanding schools I have had the pleasure of visiting, focus on a few

memorable values that everyone can see lived out in daily school life.

At Hall School Wimbledon (HSW), we chose our values – kindness, belonging, curiosity, collaboration, and ambition – by asking what we want our pupils to be like when no one is watching. We realised that if a value is not visible in the playground, staffroom, or lunch queue, it is too abstract.

Model the values relentlessly

Pupils and colleagues pay close attention to what their leaders do, and we all embrace culture by learning from example. So, once your values are clearly defined, it is about visibly and consistently enacting them. A simple act, such as greeting pupils at the gate every morning, highlights to our colleagues, young people, and families that being present and showing warmth are part of our school life.

We also pay special attention to showing empathy when responding to challenges, speaking with staff, or handling concerns from parents. Leading with our values and handling these difficult moments with our morals as our compass can strengthen school culture more than a themed assembly ever could.

Culture is ultimately established when school leaders reflect their values in both word and deed.

Build joint responsibility across the school

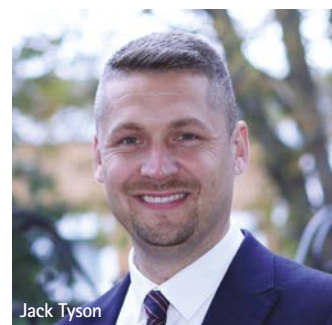
At HSW, we make time to discuss our values with colleagues to ensure everyone knows what is expected of them. All should understand why our values matter and how to show them in classrooms, corridors, and meetings. This does not mean everyone has to be the same, as schools benefit from different styles and strengths, but we should all share the same purpose.

As we grow our community, we also discuss values during the recruitment and induction process by asking questions like: “How would you respond if a colleague spoke dismissively to a pupil?”

These open conversations help everyone to start on the same page and show new colleagues that our values are more than a slogan.

Embed values into daily routines by giving pupils ownership

Everyday interactions, such as assemblies or tutor time, can be great opportunities to reinforce school values. At HSW, we formally recognise students who exemplify our culture and values through a merit system. For example, a child who consistently demonstrates kindness in the playground may receive a merit, which is recorded and contributes to their overall reward tally. Merits are discussed weekly and celebrated through a



merit raffle. On Friday mornings, the whole school joins an online call and raffle tickets are drawn for prizes including school equipment, movie afternoons, pizza parties, or breakfast with the headteacher.

We also encourage positive phone calls home for children who consistently demonstrate the school values. These are well received by parents, making it easier to have difficult conversations if they come up.

Partner with families and the wider community

We have doubled down on our efforts to help parents understand our values and the reasons behind them, so they become allies. I believe culture should not be locked behind the school gates. Building strong relationships with families of the children we educate has helped everyone reinforce shared expectations. By working closely with our families, our pupils now receive consistent messages about behaviour and character at home and at school.

Over the years, we have also partnered with our local community to bring HSW's values to life. Our relationships with local charities, including our annual Christmas parcel collection for The Wimbledon Guild, have been one of the most fulfilling ways for pupils to see kindness and responsible citizenship in action.

The work is never finished

Building culture and values is one of the most rewarding parts of leading a school. When we do this with care and consistency, pupils feel included, staff feel supported, and families feel they belong to something bigger. The values might be written on the walls in these schools, but learning thrives because they are also lived every day.

Witnessing funding in action

Local primary pupils learning computer coding at Whitgift School, Croydon, have shared their skills with the CEO of the John Whitgift Foundation.

Roisha Hughes' visit marked six months since the Foundation assumed funding responsibility for a partnership programme between Whitgift School and local primary schools, which aims to increase access to Whitgift's facilities and support pupil attainment and aspirations.

Launched in 2000, the Primary Project has seen more than 25,000 children from 35 schools take part in an enrichment programme in which pupils join lessons in computing, science,

Pictured: Roisha Hughes at Whitgift School with Assistant Head (Partnerships and Development) Andy Marlow



music and languages at Whitgift School.

The Foundation's CEO, Roisha Hughes, said: “This is an important part of John Whitgift Foundation's commitment to supporting education across Croydon, which is why Whitgift's partnership programme is now being funded by the Foundation.”

Raising the bar for school laboratories with the Miele ExploreLine

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, schools are expected to deliver not only academic excellence but also safe, efficient, and future ready learning environments. Nowhere is this more evident than in the science laboratory, where cleanliness, precision, and safety underpin

every experiment. The Miele PLW 8604 laboratory glasswasher offers independent schools a transformative step forward – replacing time consuming manual washing with a streamlined, high-performance solution designed specifically for educational settings.

The PLW 8604 delivers up to 59% time savings, cleaning as many as 60 items of glassware in just 24 minutes – a significant advantage for busy school labs that support back to back lessons and practical assessments. Beyond speed, it consumes 63% less water than manual washing, aligning with schools' growing commitments to sustainability and responsible resource use.

Its intuitive touch display, clear text interface, and modular EasyLoad system ensure that staff and students can operate and load the machine effortlessly, reducing training requirements and minimising handling errors. At the same time, the machine's ability to process up to 64 narrow necked items per cycle ensures that even the most demanding practical sessions can be reset quickly and safely.

Crucially, automated washing greatly improves laboratory safety – reducing exposure to chemicals, aerosols, and breakage risks associated with manual handling. This supports wellbeing while also ensuring consistently high hygiene standards across science departments.

With built in WiFi connectivity, the PLW 8604 allows seamless documentation and integration with school systems, making compliance and record keeping easier for technicians and department heads alike.

For independent schools aiming to modernise their laboratories, reduce workload on technicians, and enhance pupil safety, the Miele PLW 8604 represents an investment not just in equipment, but in educational quality, sustainability, and operational excellence.



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Stay and Play Sessions

Following a trial over the Autumn and Spring terms, Burgess Hill Girls, West Sussex, have announced that Buzz & Be, a free weekly stay and play programme designed for boys and girls aged 0–4 and their parents/carers is to become a permanent fixture.

Held every Friday during term time, Buzz & Be is led by the school's Early Years practitioners. Each session features a weekly theme that encourages exploration, communication,

physical development, and early problem solving.

Not just for children, the sessions have also been designed to provide families with opportunities to observe teaching approaches, gain practical insights, and learn more about how young children develop – physically, emotionally, and cognitively.

Assistant Head – Prep at Burgess Hill Girls, Sue Collins, said: “We see every day how much more confident and settled children are when they start school with strong early foundations. Equally, parents benefit from understanding how their child learns and how everyday play shapes their development. Buzz & Be brings those two strands together, supporting children while empowering parents.”



Pictured: Stay and Play session at Burgess Hill Girls



Early Years expansion

Yarrells School, Dorset, which is set to mark its 100th year in 2027, has announced that as of this month they will be welcoming babies from just six months – ten years after the opening of its nursery.

Founded in 1927 as St Monica's School in Deal, Kent, the school

relocated to Poole, Dorset in 1940. In 2016, Greenwood Nursery was opened as a purpose-built early years setting and is integrated within the school's grounds. The expansion will offer a continuous pathway for families from infancy through to the end of prep school.

Pictured: Greenwood Nursery

Advertorial Feature

PHVC launches the new 16-seat fully electric Ford eTransit Minibus

As a trusted supplier of transport solutions for schools and colleges across the UK, PHVC has unveiled the latest addition to their electric fleet: the new **EV16**, a 16-seat fully electric Ford Transit minibus.

Combining zero-emission performance with increased passenger capacity, the EV16 enables schools, and Colleges to operate a fully electric minibus carrying up to 16 passengers, marking a significant step forward in sustainable transport.

Thanks to updated licence rules, the EV16 can also be driven on a standard Category B car licence (subject to conditions), offering schools:

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- a practical, compliant way to expand an electric fleet



Alongside the EV16, PHVC also offers the EV WAV², a customisable, wheelchair-accessible electric vehicle designed to support inclusive transport. With flexible configurations and capacity to accommodate multiple wheelchair users, the EV WAV² ensures accessibility without compromising efficiency or comfort.

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CHANGING FACES... CHANGING PLACES...



Ballard School, Hampshire, is shortly to welcome a new Headmaster, following the tenure of Andrew McCleave, who

joined the school in 2018. Stuart Turner, previously Deputy Head at Emanuel School, London, will take the helm at the start of the summer term.



Warminster School, Wiltshire, has announced that Mark Sully will succeed Matt Williams as Headmaster from September 2026.

community since joining the school in 2011, serving as Deputy Head (Academic) since 2015.

The Warminster community will welcome Mark as headmaster, together with his wife Jemma and their two young children, Joshua and Isabelle.



The Governing Body of Feltonfleet School, Surrey, has announced the appointment of Oliver Barrett as the new Head of School. He will take up the role in 2027, succeeding current head Shelley Lance.

his current role as Head of Twickenham Prep School, Middlesex. Prior to this, Oliver has also held senior leadership roles at St George's Junior School, Surrey. A handover period is set to begin immediately to ensure a smooth transition before Oliver's formal 2027 start date.

Mark has been a longstanding member of the Warminster



Morrison's Academy, Perthshire, has announced the appointment of Robert Garnish as its Chief Operating Officer.

St Andrews, Mr Garnish took up the post in March. He has previously held senior positions at Glenalmond College, the John Lewis Partnership, and the University of Glasgow Commercial Services.

A graduate of the University of



Wrekin College, Shropshire, has announced its new headteacher.

experience across various schools, joining Queen's College in 2018.

Outside the classroom, Steve enjoys a range of sporting and outdoor pursuits including cricket, golf, distance running, and wing foiling.



Windlesham House School, West Sussex, have announced the appointment of Mrs Sophie Baber as their new head, effective 1 September.

Hampshire, Salisbury Cathedral School, Wiltshire, and, most recently, Longacre School in Surrey.

Sophie has previously led three independent schools: Brookham, the Pre-Prep at Highfield in

Her teaching career also includes prep-level roles at Marlborough College Malaysia and The Tanglin Trust School in Singapore, as well as experience in the UK state primary sector as a SENDCo.

Having begun his teaching career in 2004, Steve has leadership

He will be joined at Wrekin by his wife Kate and their two teenage children.

Have a new head you would like mentioned?

Please email: changingfaces@independentschoolsmagazine.co.uk

Heads Hunted

Among the upcoming head and principal appointments:

Campbell College Junior School	Co. Antrim
Headington Rye Senior School	Oxfordshire
St John's School, Sidmouth	Devon
Twickenham Prep School	London

If you would like mention made of your upcoming head or principal appointment for which applications are sought please let us know – there is no charge for a listing.

News items, contributions, comments and suggestions are always welcomed by the editor.

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Vires per Verum – Strength through Truth

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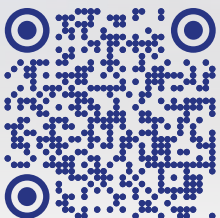
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A photograph of two young women standing on a balcony with a metal railing, laughing and looking towards the right. The woman on the left is wearing a dark blue sweater over a white collared shirt and dark blue trousers. The woman on the right is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a red collar and a dark blue skirt with a red grid pattern. The background shows a clear blue sky and green trees.

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