

# ISA JOURNAL

CURRICULUM | ISSUE 33 | MARCH 2025

Inside Britain's first  
screen-free school

The case for humanism in  
religious education

Beyond stereotypes,  
a conversation with Lord Lexden

Faith schools and the  
national curriculum

Harnessing the power of AI



A photograph of three students walking outdoors. On the left is a young woman with dark curly hair tied back, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and a dark blue plaid skirt. In the center is a young man wearing a light blue shirt, a dark blue V-neck sweater, and a yellow and purple striped tie. On the right is another young man wearing a light blue shirt, a dark blue V-neck sweater, and a yellow and purple striped tie. They are all smiling and looking towards the right. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

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# Welcome

FROM THE CEO

## Rudolf Eliott Lockhart



An Association of independent schools can seem a curious thing. What brings us all together is the independence that means we can do things differently. It might seem strange to be bound together by the shared right to not be alike, but the sharing of independence is at the core of what makes our schools what they are in all their diversity. This is a topic I recently had the opportunity to discuss with colleagues from independent sectors

from across Europe and parts of Asia. It was clear to me that our schools have a greater degree of independence than is the case for the equivalent sectors in other countries. We have the independence to choose the curriculum, to select the pupils, and to hire the staff we choose. We have governance that is independent of the state, and we have financial independence from the state. These five aspects of independence help to explain both why our schools are so diverse, and also why our schools are so successful.

In this issue of the Journal, we celebrate some of the different ways that our schools embrace that independence. Stephen Burley examines how schools like King's High are using their curriculum independence to integrate new 'Future-Ready Courses' alongside traditional GCSEs, to better prepare students for a rapidly evolving world. Bex Tear from Fulham School presents the argument for introducing philosophy in pre-prep schools, fostering critical thinking from an early age. Jason Fletcher sets out how he has been able to make The Heritage School in Cambridge the UK's first screen-free school, while James Wilding from Claires Court explores the role of AI tools in curriculum development. Both Jason and James use their independence to take different approaches within their schools.

We have a series of articles that look at aspects of religion or belief in schools. Nicky Hardy draws on her experience as Deputy Head (Pastoral) at a Quaker school and Chair of Governors at a Catholic

school as she explores the role of a school's ethos in shaping all aspects of the school and in underpinning leadership. Aliya Azam sets out the distinctive Shi'a contribution that shapes her school and the role of the community at low-fee independent schools, not least in providing the financial support that is necessary to keep the fees as affordable as possible. Nabihah Ahmed from King Alfred School shares strategies for building inclusive school communities, emphasising our commitment to diversity and belonging. There is also an article from Luke Donnellan on the value of studying Humanism within the religious education curriculum. At ISA we can be proud of each ethos that exists, both religious and not, within our schools, and the way that we support genuine parental choice. This range of different schools and approaches reflects the pluralist nature of our society

We also address broader societal views of independent schools and Lord Lexden, ISA President, offers a strong challenge to some of the common misconceptions about independent schools and highlights our sector's commitment to inclusivity and social mobility.

This issue of the Journal captures just a small part of what independence can mean. It is right that we defend the five aspects of independence that I set out and recognise how important each of them is to what we do. We should not take any of this independence for granted. In other countries, there are independent sectors that do not have the full range of independence that our schools have. But by working together, through our Association, we can defend and promote our independence, and celebrate the outstanding schools that it makes possible.

### CONTRIBUTORS

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This issue's cover features a pupil from Leighton Park (LW) in Design & Technology class.



### WRITE FOR THE JOURNAL

Our Members want to hear about best practice, so if you would like to contribute an article to the ISA Journal, please contact [comms@isaschools.org.uk](mailto:comms@isaschools.org.uk) with an outline of your topic. See our website for guidelines.





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Edenhurst Preparatory School (M), photo courtesy of Sam Peat

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STEPHEN BURLEY

# Adapting to the age of AI

## Curriculum design and future-ready courses

**As educationalists monitor the rapid developments in AI and look ahead to the seismic changes that this will bring for our society, economy and jobs market, we inevitably return to the debates around traditional school curricula and the turbo-charged change that is happening around us.**

How do school leaders ensure that teaching and learning, and traditional academic disciplines, continue to be relevant amidst the new social and technological developments? How do schools respond and adapt to prepare our students for the shape-shifting possibilities of future careers and employment? As we continue the drive towards traditional GCSEs and A Levels, with no apparent likelihood of reform on the horizon, how is it possible to maintain academic standards whilst preparing our students for portfolio careers in the age of Artificial Intelligence?

These are challenges that all schools face as they navigate an increasingly complex terrain both financially and educationally. Whilst the pressing financial challenges from VAT on independent school fees and increased costs from national insurance, teacher pensions and business rates rightly occupy so much attention, it is easy for us to step back from the core educational questions of our day.

There has been much debate about the future of education. The Times Education Commission called for 'a radical reshaping of an education system that is increasingly seen as out of touch.' And

whilst calls for GCSE and A Level reform continue unabated, there is a clear sense that school curricula will never be agile enough to comprehensively and robustly adapt to the rapid changes in technology and society.

There have been some impressive and bold innovators. Latimer Upper and Bedales, for example, have pledged that their students will be required to take two GCSEs only from 2027 – English Language and Maths. This enables them to introduce their own, bespoke and self-assessed courses that will cover new content and prioritise relevant skills, allowing them to be more flexible and adaptive to real-world scenarios.

At King's High, Warwick, we, too, have redesigned our curriculum as part of a wide-ranging Curriculum of the Future Project. We believe that there is still an important place for a smaller core of GCSEs and we believe that students, and their parents, should have the freedom and flexibility to elect the portfolio of courses and subjects, around a core of compulsory GCSEs, to create the perfect pathway for them. Choice and flexibility, the celebration of independence and difference, are at the heart of our ethos as we work with our students to develop the very best and bespoke pathways. For some, this will be a traditional diet of 10 GCSEs; for others, it will be a small core of six or seven GCSEs alongside our new Future Ready Courses and project-based qualifications (iPQs, HPQs and EPQs).

One outcome of our Curriculum of the Future Project is the development of two new, GCSE equivalents, 'Future-Ready Courses'. The new courses were launched for first teaching in September 2022 and are proving to be very popular among our students. Over three-quarters of our GCSE cohorts opt for one of the two new courses, with a handful opting for both. The aim is to provide powerful and inspiring alternatives for our students that enable them to explore new and future-facing domains of knowledge, promote creative and innovative thinking, and adopt a different assessment model to the terminal assessments of GCSEs.

Our Innovation and Entrepreneurship Programme includes modules in Sustainable Engineering, Data Analysis, Neuroscience and Entrepreneurship. Our Sustainable Engineering module introduces students to a host of new technologies so that they gain practical skills to understand how engineering solutions can mitigate the effects of climate change and help humanity live more sustainably. Our Data Analysis module teaches the skills that will help our students analyse, evaluate and contrast large and complex data sets. Our Neuroscience module enables students to understand the structure and function of the nervous system, neurons, and the brain with a focus on neuropathologies and the bioethical issues stemming from this. Our Entrepreneurship module explores theories of business and enterprise before requiring students to put these into practice through a pupil-designed business venture.

Our new Global Changemakers Programme covers modules in Social Justice, Climate Change, Global Citizenship and Law and the Legal System. The Social Justice module explores wealth inequality, causes of poverty, and racial and gender inequality with a strong focus on critical and creative thinking, problem-solving and collaborative learning. The Climate Change module introduces our students to climate science, the natural systems maintaining the Earth's climate, the human impacts on these systems, and how scientists monitor climate systems. The Global Citizenship module examines the interconnectivity of nation-states and requires students to reflect on politics, economics and global development, covering topics including democracy and the nation-state, international law and human rights, and social media and citizenship. The Law and Legal System module allows students to practise advocacy skills whilst exploring topics including criminal law, law and the media, police powers, and the law and feminism.

The new courses combine in-depth knowledge with a sharp focus on the valuable skills of creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, oracy and digital literacy. Moving away from the heavy GCSE focus on written examination and terminal assessment, the new Future-Ready Courses combine modular written assessment with a much broader range of assessment methods including TED-style talks, presentations, 'viva voce' discussion, film-making and business planning. For example, the assessed component of the Sustainable Engineering module sees students build model electric vehicles, wind-powered generators and load-supporting frames; the assessed component of the Law and Legal System module sees students practise advocacy skills in a courtroom scenario.

Dr Phil Seal, Deputy Head Academic, has led these exciting developments and these are his reflections on progress so far:

"One of my recent career highlights was the film night for the Social Justice module, at which pupils, parents and staff gathered to watch short pieces about social injustice. The deeper magic was the sight of Year 10 pupils engaging in a process of independently forming their interests, becoming passionate, gathering wonderful knowledge, and presenting it engagingly and creatively. The experience of that evening made the public debate about GCSEs feel very thin indeed. It couldn't be more obvious that providing variety and creativity for Years 10 and 11 provides myriad benefits. So my conclusion won't come as a surprise: logistics are important, but never let them become your guiding light. For me, playing a part in the buzz, energy, intelligence and personal growth provided by our two courses has given me as much professional pride as anything else I have worked on as Deputy Head of King's High. Finding time for our mid-teens to engage in flexibly-designed courses is both logistically doable and one of the most important things we can do as secondary educators."

As for our students, when asked about the benefits of undertaking our Future Ready Courses, they have highlighted the following:

- Being able to focus on enjoyment and taking learning into my own hands more
- Expanding my world knowledge and allowing me to explore important topics
- Having my perspective changed on global issues
- Developing my independence and understanding of society more
- Seeing that learning can be informative and extremely fun at the same time
- Thinking outside the box
- Teaching you about issues that are going to become more prominent

One example of student feedback particularly stands out:

"I have learnt about many issues in the world that affect people on a much deeper level than I had ever thought about; people in the world struggle and you see that on the news, but the depths of the struggles are immense and nobody ever thinks about it at the level that we have in this course, so I would say the main benefit of this course is discovering the depths of the problem and coming up with solutions and ways that work and don't. I will always think about issues on a deeper level now."

Amidst the inevitable focus on school finances in our new age of VAT on independent school fees, it is all the more important to continue the work to address the educational challenges of our day. It's important to be bold, to innovate and to work together to find solutions that will enhance the experiences and futures of the students in our care.



Dr Stephen Burley, Head Master of King's High School in Warwick, earned degrees from University College London and Oxford, culminating in a PhD that led to his book, *Hazlitt the Dissenter* (2014). His teaching career has spanned several prestigious institutions, including roles in London, Bogotá, and Oxford, leading to his appointment as Head Master at King's High in 2021. Dr Burley advocates for innovative education that prioritises student wellbeing and prepares future changemakers. His passion for education is rooted in the belief that inspirational teaching transforms lives. His exceptional leadership was recently recognised with the 'Best Head of a Public School' award in the Tatler Schools Guide Awards 2025.





BEX TEAR

# Big questions for little minds

## Philosophy in Early Education

**"Sometimes the life that you have is better than the life that you think you want" really is a BIG STATEMENT and this is exactly the type of proposition that our Year 1 and 2 pupils put forward in their Philosophy class. Fulham Pre-Prep has grown its 'Big Questions for Little Minds' programme as a key strand of fostering an environment where creativity, open-mindedness and personal growth are at the forefront of our educational approach.**

Fulham Pre-Prep introduced Philosophy into the KS1 curriculum to underpin our school values of innovation and positive engagement and support our focus on the development of social skills and oracy. By engaging in weekly Philosophy lessons, our pupils learn to think independently and collaboratively, making wise personal choices and moral decisions, essential skills for active citizenship. We also love celebrating the pupils during "Philosopher of the Week", highlighting insightful contributions and inspiring the entire school community; another way to celebrate different pupil abilities and foster their wellbeing.

The philosophy program is designed to stimulate debate and discussion between pupils, moving away from traditional teacher-led approaches. Instead, the role of our teachers is to facilitate discussions and enable the negotiations between the pupils, encouraging explanations, and considerations of others' perspectives and reinforcing that there is not always a right or wrong answer.

**Year 1 pupil – 'I like philosophy because it is something that if you have a question there is no right or wrong.'**

This approach has been a great leveller, especially for young pupils who may struggle with fine motor and literacy skills but shine with their verbal clarity of expression. Through engaging in activities like handling ambiguous objects and debating their use, pupils learn to justify their opinions, actively listen and empathise with others. For example, in a Year 1 lesson, pupils debated what items, from a random selection provided, Postman Pat should take on holiday, leading to diverse and creative reasoning. These sessions teach children to respect differing viewpoints and articulate their thoughts clearly, fostering an inclusive and reflective classroom environment.

**Year 2 pupil – 'I like Philosophy because it has questions that you can think about and it is about life.'**

In the second stage of each class, pupils participate in weekly democracy by each holding a voting stick; they place their sticks on the preferred question (all posed by the children), with the most popular one chosen for debate. Then, using the 'Philosopher's Stone'



(a rock geode which has been cut to reveal its crystalline interior, which brings a sense of awe and wonder to our Key Stage One pupils), they manage its passing to indicate readiness to speak and ensure all voices are heard as the stone is shared.

### **Year 1 pupil – ‘You can hold the Philosopher’s Stone and that is when you can share what you think.’**

In terms of the quality and depth of the conversations, the opening quote was a good example from Alexander, a seven-year-old who astounded his peers and teachers with this profound statement during one of our philosophy lessons. It reflects the insight and thoughtfulness our students are developing. Other favourite questions selected for debate recently include ‘Does Luck Exist?’ (Year 2) and ‘Is it ever ok to lie?’ (Year 1). It is even more heartening that teachers have noted that the quieter pupils are gaining the confidence and strategies to express their opinions respectfully, for example, stating, “That is your opinion, and this is mine.” This shift has changed classroom dynamics, encouraging all pupils to appreciate the unique contributions of their peers.

Workshops for parents of Year 1 and Year 2 students have been introduced to extend the impact of these lessons into the home; these have been well attended and feedback most positive about the program. Weekly contact sheets detailing the warmup activities and philosophical questions ensure that parents can continue discussions with their children at home, transforming family interactions, to reduce screen time and build communication skills. It lends itself to some lively and humorous conversations at the school gate too, as parents bring feedback from their forays into the philosophy conversations at home!

The philosophy program has also fostered a culture of continuous learning and curiosity among our staff (and families). Discussions from philosophy lessons have also inspired deeper conversations in the staff room, reframing our estimation of our students’ capabilities. This lends itself well to supporting a wide range of the curriculum, but we increasingly see strong verbalisation in reasoning lessons as pupils justify their chosen outcomes and explain to the teacher or class; this is valuable as they consider next step schools in London’s competitive entry processes. Informal feedback about our Pre-Prep pupils attending interviews also highlights increasingly positive comments about their highly articulate nature and confidence to share views.

For the staff team curating the ‘random objects’ seemed like a daunting task at first, but quickly falls into the regular rhythm of lesson prep. One teacher fed back ‘Initially I got anxious about finding objects that the pupils could make sense of, wondering how they would link them to the focus of the week or the lead object. As I began curating the sessions I quickly realised that no matter how random my objects were, the joy of the session was the miraculous connections and ideas the pupils had about them. I come away seeing the world through a different lens!’.

Above all, the pupils look forward to this activity each week:

### **Year 2 pupil – ‘I enjoy philosophy because I can listen to new stories and think of new questions.’**

It is without doubt that Fulham Pre-Prep’s introduction of Philosophy into the KS1 curriculum has positively impacted our pupils, staff and community. By fostering a culture of thoughtful debate and respect for diverse viewpoints, we have nurtured independent thinkers who are well-equipped for the challenges of the future. Philosophy is a real tonic and we highly recommend it.



Bex Tear is currently the Executive Head of Fulham School, a 2-18 ISA Co-Ed Day School in London. Her previously held positions have been Head at a 3-18 Day and Boarding GSA and HMC school, as well as Senior Deputy and Head of Sixth at a GSA & HMC Boarding School. Over her varied career, she has held a range of academic and pastoral responsibilities.



Lord Lexden presents the ISA Lexden Prize to the 2024 recipient from St David's College

LORD LEXDEN  
ISA PRESIDENT

## Beyond stereotypes

**Nothing is more difficult to change than firmly entrenched error. I encounter this in my work as a historian. Benjamin Disraeli, perhaps the most colourful of all Tory leaders, is widely credited with having invented one-nation conservatism. Not once during a long career did he mention it. The credit really belongs to a 20th-century Tory leader, Stanley Baldwin. One interesting fact about Disraeli incidentally is that he reached the pinnacle of success as prime minister in 1878, the year that the ISA was founded.**

Independent schools have to endure their persistent error: the entrenched belief that they are all much the same. Elitist, expensive, exclusive: such words leap predictably from the lips of certain journalists and politicians. A glance at the annual ISC census, whose statistics set out the truth about the widely differing characteristics of our schools, ought to banish the myths. Yet they persist, standing truth on its head.

I worry a little that the now widespread use of the term "private school" adds to the difficulty of crushing rampant error. It can so easily reinforce the utterly false view that our schools exist in a private world of their own, indifferent to what happens beyond their gates. A letter in *The Times* a few years ago from a former HMC chairman pointed out that when in the 1990s journalists "began to follow the lead of Blair's Labour government in using the term private instead of independent, a previously rarely used but politically loaded preference was normalised. Before then, independence was thoroughly embedded in our usage." This Labour government is now elevating the word private above independent by incorporating it in some of the legislation which gives effect to its iniquitous policies.

Nevertheless, the strong criticism that Labour's policies have attracted will, I suspect, make more people more conscious than ever before of what independent schools are really like. The old caricatures will be forced into retreat. The full diversity of independent schools is at last beginning to be properly understood in the country at large as a result of the deluge of publicity that angry parents and teachers, affronted by Labour's education tax, are giving to the various features of independent schools that

they cherish so much: their small size, their community spirit, the dedication of their staff, their excellence in the arts, their wonderful work with children who have special needs, their provision for different religious faiths. The list is a long one.

And where are these things and more to be found most conspicuously of all? Among the extraordinarily varied range of excellent schools within ISA, now totalling nearly 700. Our association is the very embodiment of Britain's long tradition of diverse independent education, stretching back to the 19th century in an organised form, which will survive Labour's current bout of hostility, harmful though that is going to be. Along with colleagues in all parts of the House of Lords, I have challenged the Government at every possible opportunity, conscious of the damage that its education tax will do.

It will undoubtedly be the objective of everyone in ISA to limit that damage as much as they can so that our schools continue to serve hard-working, aspirational families of all kinds who turn to them to prepare their children for successful careers by nurturing their differing individual talents. I will do all I can in Parliament to support that fightback, in which our superb team at ISA House will of course be playing a key part.



Lord (Alistair) Lexden OBE has been President of ISA since 2013. He began his career teaching history at Queen's University, Belfast. During the 1980s and much of the 1990s he was a senior official of the Conservative Party. Between 1997 and 2004 he was General Secretary of the Independent Schools Council.



# School News

CELEBRATING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ACROSS THE ASSOCIATION

Here is a selection of exciting news that has been shared with us from across the ISA membership. Please share your school's news with us at [comms@isaschools.org.uk](mailto:comms@isaschools.org.uk) or tag us on X @isaschools to potentially appear in future editions of the Journal, on the ISA website, or shared on social media.

## Reception's multi-sensory Chinese New Year exploration



Carleton House Preparatory School (N)

Carleton House's Reception class immersed themselves in Chinese culture and New Year celebrations. The home corner was transformed into 'Carleton China', a Chinese restaurant where children played various roles, including waiters, chefs, and customers. They practised taking bookings, serving traditional Chinese food and even welcomed the Headteacher as a special guest. The class also engaged in literacy activities, forming capital letters inspired by dragons, creating glittering Chinese symbols and enjoying books about Chinese culture, with "The Great Race" being a favourite.

The children explored various aspects of Chinese culture through hands-on activities. They learned about the Zodiac animals through music and playdough, practised fine motor skills using chopsticks and pegs, and created spiral snakes for the Year of the Snake. The class also worked on art projects, including a collaborative dragon for the classroom wall and recycled glass jar lanterns. They tasted Chinese fruits, with Chinese pear being the favourite, and enjoyed a visit from a local Martial Arts company that performed a lion and dragon show, teaching them about the emperor and the pearl that the dragon follows.

## Spreading Christmas cheer through generations

At Ursuline Preparatory School, the Kindergarten class embraced the Christmas spirit by visiting a local care home for their annual festive celebration. Accompanied by four Upper Two pupils, the children delighted residents by singing traditional Christmas carols, with the elderly warmly joining in and smiling with genuine joy. Each child carefully selected a book and spent time reading one-to-one with the residents, creating intimate moments of connection and shared storytelling.

The magical visit culminated with Santa sparking the tree's lights, creating a memorable moment for both the children and care home residents. The students sang their hearts out, bringing happiness and warmth to the elderly, and engaged in conversations about Christmas traditions and family celebrations. This heartwarming experience demonstrated the school's commitment to intergenerational understanding and community spirit during the festive season.



Ursuline Preparatory (E)

## A century of stories



Thorpe Hall School (E)

To celebrate its centenary year, Thorpe Hall School has created a stunning 12-metre tapestry showcasing 100 years of history, collaboratively designed by its students. Year 7 pupils (now in Year 8) contributed individual squares to the project, each representing key local, national, or international events from the past century, including world wars, pandemics, political and medical breakthroughs, as well as the school's milestones.

Highlights from Southend's history include the city's role in World War II, the iconic Southend Air Show, and disasters on Southend Pier. Spearheaded by teacher Ms Stanton, the ambitious project culminated in a commemorative book featuring a fold-out of the tapestry. The final work was unveiled at a special event attended by students, parents, and alumni, with Ms Stanton describing the students' pride in their achievement as "making it all worth it." The tapestry symbolizes Thorpe Hall School's journey from its modest beginnings in 1925 with just six boys to its current status as a thriving independent school offering award-winning education for children aged 2–16. It is now on display along the school's sports field as part of its centenary celebrations.

## Londoners celebrate Chinese New Year at Western Europe's only Mandarin-English school

Hundreds of Londoners celebrated Chinese New Year at a school in the capital that is the only one in the UK to teach all subjects in Mandarin and English. Kensington Wade, a nursery and prep school on Fulham Palace Road, put on its biggest celebration yet for the New Year. A highlight was the Lion Dance, in which performers imitated a lion's movements in costume to bring good luck and fortune. The lion is revered in Chinese culture as a symbol of courage, strength and power.



Kensington Wade (LW)

Internationally-acclaimed musician Beibei Wang also treated the crowd to a performance and workshops in traditional Chinese percussion. Wang has performed as a soloist with, among others, the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Some 600 attended the event, which was open to the public and held at the school.

Huw May, Head of Kensington Wade, said: "Our Chinese New Year celebrations have captivated our children and all our community. Our school is in the unique position of being the only one in Western Europe to provide an immersive bilingual

- Mandarin and English - education from nursery to prep school. This means we take the very best from British and Chinese cultures and combine this with academic excellence and outstanding pastoral care. Chinese New Year is very special to us because we put into practice so much of what we have learnt during the year and this culminates with a celebration of what is one of the most important holidays in Chinese culture."

## Out of this world



Pitsford School (M)

Pitsford School in Northamptonshire has been focusing its youngest students on the race to the stars. Exploring the topic of space and using the new outdoor classroom, located in the school's secret garden, our early years children have constructed their jet packs out of household items (cereal boxes, potato chip tubes and the like), like twenty-first century Wombles. With their carefully packed teddy bears and snacks for the journey, they are educating the space travellers of the future.

## Oxford school launches innovative Green Challenge for young learners

Wychwood Inspires is a Saturday morning programme at Wychwood School, Oxford, for Year 5 and 6 pupils. Run by experienced staff, these free sessions are designed to be fun, inclusive, and interactive, fostering curiosity and developing practical and academic skills.

Recent sessions focused on 'The Great Green Challenge', where participants developed green business ideas with an emphasis on renewable energy. Teams researched and presented their concepts in a 'Dragons' Den' style pitch. The winning team, 'Hamstenergy', proposed harnessing energy from hamsters running on wheels to power small devices like mobile phone chargers.

In the final session, pupils designed environmentally sustainable theme parks, considering factors such as transport, water, litter, and energy use. They then built physical models of their designs using outdoor materials, demonstrating their understanding of ecological considerations in real-world applications.



Wychwood School (LN)

Many ISA Members' Schools engage in partnerships with state schools to expand the opportunities and experiences available to pupils and teachers from all schools involved. Celebrating these projects is essential in showcasing the independent sector's value and inspiring more schools to play their part. ISA schools can share their partnerships on the ISC Schools Together website:

[www.schoolstogether.org/about/adding-school-partnerships/](http://www.schoolstogether.org/about/adding-school-partnerships/).



# ISA Awards 2023 Case Study: Colchester High School

## Excellence and Innovation in Mental Health and Well-being



Colchester Prep & High School, founded in 1882, has evolved from a boy's school into a renowned co-educational establishment over its 140-year history. Today it offers a STEAM-powered curriculum that blends Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics; fostering creative thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. The school emphasises environmental consciousness and social responsibility, aiming to develop "changemakers" who excel academically and contribute positively to society. With small class sizes, a robust extra-curricular program, and excellent pastoral care, the school nurtures well-rounded individuals. As part of the Cognita family of schools, it provides students with global perspectives and a range of opportunities to develop their understanding of diverse cultures. Colchester Prep & High School combines its rich history with a future-focused approach, equipping students with the academic foundation and life skills needed to thrive in an ever-changing world.

### AIMS

The well-being strategy aims to create a comprehensive approach to mental health and overall wellness within the school community. It seeks to integrate mental health awareness across the curriculum while prioritising staff well-being. The strategy emphasises promoting mindfulness and self-regulation through embedded practices and celebrates 'Global Well-being Day' to focus on various aspects of well-being such as sleep, online presence, diet, and exercise. It also aims to develop peer support systems and implement effective mental health strategies. The strategy strives to create a safe and supportive environment where everyone feels confident to seek help and thrive while tackling tough topics and breaking down mental health stigmas. Additionally, it focuses on establishing a rigorous system for early intervention and external support, providing leadership opportunities for students to promote well-being, and developing connections with the local and wider community. Ultimately, the strategy embraces the ethos of 'Be well, Live well, Learn Well' to foster a holistic approach to well-being within the school.

### ACTIONS

The implementation of the well-being strategy has involved a range of actions across the school community. A dedicated Pupil Leadership Team of Well-being Ambassadors, comprising students from Years 2-10, meets regularly to discuss and promote pupil well-being. These ambassadors have initiated various programs, including a 'Friendship Club', mindfulness workshops, and charitable community events. They have also delivered assemblies on topics such as bullying and its impact on mental health.

The school is committed to fostering a culture of well-being for both staff and students. Regular assemblies and form time sessions focus on mental wellness, anxiety, and the importance of connection. The school has implemented 'Peace Time' and 'Calm Time' strategies in both Prep and Senior schools to support daily mindfulness and self-regulation. 'Peace Time' involves two five-minute periods of silent reflection daily, while 'Calm Time' is a one-minute mindfulness technique used for behaviour management in class.

Staff well-being is addressed through a well-being charter, social events, clubs, and wellness hampers. Both staff and students participate in a school 'house' system to foster a sense of community and belonging. The school hosts guest speakers to encourage open conversations about mental health and participates annually in a Cognita-wide "Global Well-being Day" focusing on various aspects of well-being.

Peer mentoring programs, including a "Friendship Club", have been established to help students transition between year groups. The school also regularly surveys staff and students to assess the effectiveness of these programs and make necessary adjustments. Through these actions, the school has created connections with the local community and instilled a sense of pride in students for making a difference.

### OUTCOMES

The school's commitment to mental health and well-being has created a supportive environment where open discussions about mental health are encouraged. Strategies like "Peace Time" and "Calm Time" have positively impacted student behaviour and learning, with surveys showing students regularly using calming techniques learned in mindfulness workshops. Peer mentoring programs, particularly the "Friendship Club," have eased transition anxieties and fostered student connections. Community initiatives have promoted a sense of giving while developing students' leadership skills. An ISI inspection highlighted the success of these efforts, noting that students are well-informed about mental health issues and feel empowered in their academic decision-making. Overall, the school's comprehensive approach has resulted in a thriving environment where students feel supported and better equipped to manage their emotional and academic challenges.



#### Case study contributors:

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**Chloe Haggerty**, Mental Health Lead

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## UPCOMING COMPETITIONS

### HANDWRITING COMPETITION

Open Now

Deadline: 12 March

### CODING COMPETITION

Open Now

Deadline: 19 March

### EASTER EGG COMPETITION

Open for entries: 4 March

Deadline: 24 March

### YOUNG STORYTELLERS COMPETITION

Open Now

Deadline: 27 March

### BOOK COVER DESIGN COMPETITION

Open Now

Deadline: 27 March

### CHARITY EVENT CHALLENGE

Open Now

Deadline: 28 March

### DIGITAL ART COMPETITION

Open Now

Deadline: 24 April

TO STAY UP TO DATE WITH NEWSLETTERS AND COMPETITION REMINDERS, SUBSCRIBE TO OUR MAILING LISTS: TICK THE BOX FOR ARTS EMAILS IN YOUR ACCOUNT'S CONTACT PREFERENCE ON THE ISA WEBSITE.

Follow us on X and Instagram  
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Congratulations to everyone who participated in the ISA Dance Competition Finals 2025 at Reddam House Berkshire on Wednesday 29 January. The event showcased the talent of students who performed a selection of dances including contemporary, ballet, hip hop, tap, and lyrical. You can find the results on our website.



Thomas's Battersea School (LW), Dance Finals 2025.

The Young Musician Competition Final took place at Oxford University, featuring 32 talented finalists selected from over 100 entries in the first round. The standard was very high. A wonderful variety of instruments was showcased, including the harp, oboe, marimba, saxophone, and piano. Well done to all the musicians and a special congratulations to the winners. Results are available on our website.

The first event of the ISA Drama Competition was held in mid-February at Luckley House School. Well done to all participants, and good luck to the schools who will perform on 6 May at King's High School.

Don't miss out on our new competition this year the Charity Event Challenge.

Students are invited to create and plan their events to support a local charity. This competition encourages creativity, teamwork, and community engagement while providing an opportunity to develop planning and organisational skills. Open to KS2 to KS5 pupils. Visit our website for full details and to submit your entries.

For more information about all our events, including the ISA Arts calendar for the year, please visit our website. If you have any questions, please contact [isaarts@isaschools.org.uk](mailto:isaarts@isaschools.org.uk)





# National Art Competition

We are delighted to present the ISA National Art Brochure, showcasing the work of all finalists in the 2024 competition. With over 1700 entries, congratulations to all participants, the quality of the artwork was outstanding once again. If your school didn't participate, visit our website for more information on how to get involved this year.



The brochure features a vibrant background of a blue and green abstract painting with white droplets. On the left, a red vertical bar contains seven white icons: a paint palette, a hand holding a pencil, two children, two theatrical masks, a pair of sneakers, a piano keyboard, and a person at a desk. The central text 'ISA NATIONAL ART COMPETITION' is enclosed in a white square frame. Below this, a dark blue banner contains the text 'Open to all ages. Visit the ISA website for more information.' The bottom section has a dark blue background with white text stating 'Competition open to ISA Members' schools only' and providing the website 'isaschools.org.uk' and email 'isaarts@isaschools.org.uk'. The ISA Arts logo is positioned in the bottom right corner.

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**ISA**  
ARTS



Heritage School, Cambridge (E)

JASON FLETCHER

## Who ever said books weren't working?

**In October, a sister movement to Smartphone Free Childhood called Smartphone Free Schools was launched with the aim of empowering all schools to implement effective smartphone bans. At Heritage School, we are smartphone free, and we strongly encourage parents to delay giving smartphones to their children until at least age 14-16. But, we go further. We are also a screen free school.**

Before you dismiss the idea out of hand, it might help if I tell you that our GCSE results last summer were the second best in Cambridge (74% 9-7). I also need to qualify what I mean by 'screen free school'. At Heritage we celebrate creative engagement with technology. We have dedicated computing lessons from Year 6 and we offer a computing IGCSE. We also have STEM clubs, including electronics, and some of our pupils are currently preparing for a robotics competition.

When I use the term 'screen free school' I am focusing on a specific question: what are the optimal means through which to conduct routine classroom learning? To be a screen-free school, I would suggest, involves saying 'yes' to classroom methods such as: face-to-face communication, books, textbooks and other printed matter, exercise books, handwriting, the handling of things and experimental science. It involves saying 'no' to personal devices such as tablets or laptops and interactive whiteboards. More generally, it means overwhelmingly prioritising the embodied and the real and books and keeping tech in a box, used only in subjects that explicitly require it like computing and D&T. It's worth remembering that what I've just described was, until very recently, the norm.

Our stance on classroom tech has been influenced by the thinking of Charlotte Mason (1842-1923), a British Christian educational theorist and reformer who founded the Parents National Education

Union (PNEU) in the late 19th century. It was her work that inspired us to start Heritage School in 2007. I'll comment briefly on two fundamentals of her educational theory and then look back at our question from that perspective.

### Knowledge and attention

Rather than seeing knowledge merely as information or cultural capital, Charlotte Mason saw it as something much richer, and as something necessary for healthy development. She could say this because she believed that knowledge, properly understood, is a 'relation'. That is, it is the formation or strengthening of a personal connection to someone or something. This connection is established as we reach out and get in touch with nature, with others, with the best of human culture past and present, and with God. As we do so we find that we get something back. We are fed by it. And the effect is that we become, as she would say, larger people. 'By knowledge one grows, becomes more of a person, and that is all there is to show for it.'<sup>1</sup>

A second closely related concept is that of attention, which, she says, is 'of supreme importance'. One reason is that it enables a child to maximise his or her potential. 'For whatever the natural gifts of the child, it is only so far as the habit of attention is cultivated in him that he is able to make use of them.'<sup>2</sup> Going further, she emphasises that it is only when a child pays attention that real knowing takes place. She illustrates the problem of inattention with respect to a young child: 'Watch him at his investigations: he flits from thing to thing with less purpose than a butterfly amongst the flowers, staying at nothing long enough to get the good out of it.'<sup>3</sup> Without attention, without staying at it long enough, our minds, she says, will remain undernourished and growth will be stunted.



## The book vs. the internet

To explore what this attention-knowledge theory of growth has to say to the question of classroom tech, we need to start by recognising that different media have different *inherent characteristics* that subtly or not-so-subtly influence the way we think. This was the point of Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism, 'the medium is the message'. We might then ask: how might learning via the medium of the book compare with learning via the internet?

About the book Johann Hari says, 'Before the words convey their specific meaning, the medium of the book tells us several things.' Firstly, books tell us that 'life is complex, and if you want to understand it, you need to set aside a fair bit of time to think deeply about it.' Secondly, he says that books help us think deeply by 'narrowing down your attention to one thing, sentence after sentence, page after page.' Drawing on studies into 'flow states', he adds that 'a life with lots of episodes of deep focus is a good life.'<sup>4</sup>

Hari's observations fits well with Charlotte Mason's theory of growth. From this perspective, we can say that books are an outstanding tool for intellectual development. When we read, our minds are active and focussed, rather than passive and distracted. Books cultivate habits of mind such as patient reflection, focussing on one thing at a time, active cognitive and imaginative engagement, depth and nuance, and empathy, and as such they tap into the better parts of human nature. It's not surprising that Johann Hari says, 'I like the person I become when I read a lot of books.'<sup>5</sup>

Now consider the inherent characteristics of the internet. Some years ago, I was struck by a book by Nicholas Carr called *The Shallows*. 'What the Net seems to be doing,' he wrote, 'is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation.'<sup>6</sup> Carr was troubled by the fact that he could no longer read books like he used to, or even stay on one thing for more than a couple of minutes. It's an experience we can all relate to, particularly now that the internet is instantly available 24/7 on our smartphones. So what's going on? The inherent difficulty with the internet is twofold: it is too easy to switch – just click, tap, scroll or swipe – and it is too tempting to switch. One of the drivers of switching is the pull factor: the most powerful companies the world has ever seen have monetised our attention and are aggressively competing to capture it. Another driver is the push factor: various forces within us incline or even propel us online.

The cumulative effect of incessant switching upon cognition is causing serious alarm. Professor of Neuroscience Earl Miller of MIT argues that digital distractions have created in our culture 'a perfect storm of cognitive degradation.'<sup>7</sup> James Williams believes that the internet has created a crisis of self-regulation, one so severe that he concludes: 'the liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time.'<sup>8</sup>

When seen from a Charlotte Mason perspective, the bias of the internet towards switching makes it highly problematic. It cultivates intellectual habits such as instant gratification, short attention span, passive consumption, shallow engagement, oversimplification and tribalism, and as such it taps into the worst of human nature. It is not enough to say that the internet is a comparatively poor tool for cognitive development. By fundamentally compromising our powers of attention and self-regulation, it is striking, like an axe at the root of a tree, at the very possibility.

## Conclusions

Effective classroom learning has many facets, but with respect to whether or not routine learning should be mediated through screens, our answer at Heritage School is clear: books, textbooks, other printed matter, exercise books, and handwriting are far more effective tools for cognitive development than tablets, laptops and interactive whiteboards. Books (etc.) go at the right speed. They enculturate and habituate pupils to intellectual virtues essential to a deep education. Classroom tech, by contrast, enculturates and habituates, we might even say enslaves, our pupils to the shallow world of the internet – right where big tech wants them.

Recently, The Sunday Times said that Heritage School is 'thought to be the only screen-free school in Britain'.<sup>9</sup> Is it too much to hope that others will join us? Over the course of half a millennium, the book unleashed the most dramatic flowering of human creativity in history. Who ever decided that books weren't working? We have been deceived by a false promise, and the strain is all too apparent. Will we now succumb to the yet more powerful deception of AI? It's time we wake up. For the sake of our children, let's put tech back into the box where it belongs.



Jason Fletcher is the Headmaster, and co-founder with his wife Fiona, of Heritage School in Cambridge. Fiona is the Head of Outreach, organising visits by educators who want to learn more about their approach. See [www.heritateschool.org.uk](http://www.heritateschool.org.uk) for more information.

## Endnotes

- 1 Charlotte Mason, *An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education: A Liberal Education for All* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd, 1925), 325.
- 2 Mason, *Home Education*, 147.
- 3 Mason, *Home Education*, 140.
- 4 Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 81.
- 5 Hari, *Stolen Focus*, 81.
- 6 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way we Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 6.

- 7 Hari, *Stolen Focus*, 39.
- 8 James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), xii. See also Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vantage Books, 1993).
- 9 The Sunday Times, 15 September 2025, "UK's only screen-free school: no phones, no iPads (but top results)"



At Leighton Park (LW) the Quaker testimonies underpin every aspect of school life.

NICKY HARDY

# Shared values, lasting impact

## Spirituality in educational leadership

**Drawing on my dual roles as Deputy Head (Pastoral) at a Quaker independent boarding and day school in the UK and Chair of Governors at a Catholic secondary school, I examine how the shared values of these traditions inform leadership practices. Through this lens, I highlight the universal applicability of values-based education, offering insights into its transformative potential for independent schools, including those without a specific faith designation. The relevance of justice, peace, compassion, and environmental stewardship emerges as pivotal, enabling schools to prepare students for ethical leadership and meaningful contributions to a diverse and interconnected world. I will explore how spirituality and shared values can be woven into educational leadership to enhance student character formation and mission integrity.**

### Bridging faiths: Catholic and Quaker values in leadership

Balancing my roles in Catholic and Quaker educational contexts has afforded me a unique perspective on the interplay of spirituality and leadership. As Deputy Head (Pastoral) at a Quaker school, I find that moments of silence, reflective practices, and the Quaker commitment to simplicity and peace deeply inform the ethos of our community. Meanwhile, my role as Chair of Governors at a Catholic secondary school connects me to the structured and systemic framework of Catholic Social Teaching, with its emphasis on human dignity and the common good. Together, these traditions provide complementary insights into fostering inclusive and compassionate school environments.

Catholicism and Quakerism share a dedication to values such as justice, peace, service, and compassion. These principles transcend doctrinal differences, offering a foundation for holistic leadership that nurtures both individuals and communities. In my daily work, I strive to bridge these traditions, encouraging dialogue and understanding. This approach is not only about blending faiths but about highlighting shared human values that resonate across cultures and belief systems. For non-faith schools, these values provide a blueprint for creating cohesive and ethical communities.

Central to this effort is the concept of mission integrity—the alignment of a school’s practices, policies, and culture with its

stated values and ethos. In faith schools, mission integrity ensures that religious principles underpin decision-making and community life. In non-faith schools, the concept is equally relevant: it involves ensuring that a school’s espoused values, such as respect, inclusivity, and excellence, are consistently reflected in its actions. This alignment fosters trust and coherence, empowering school communities to thrive.

In a practical sense, this means embedding shared values into the culture and practices of the school. At my Quaker school, moments of collective silence encourage reflection and mindfulness, fostering an environment where students and staff feel grounded and valued. At the Catholic school, the liturgical calendar and acts of service offer touchpoints for community connection and purpose. While rooted in specific traditions, these practices hold universal appeal and can be adapted to suit any school setting.

### The role of interfaith dialogue in educational leadership

Interfaith dialogue is a cornerstone of my leadership philosophy, not as an abstract ideal but as a transformative practice that builds empathy and strengthens communities. In my work, engaging with diverse perspectives enriches our understanding of shared values and fosters inclusivity. The Independent Schools Association (ISA), for example, champions this principle through its interfaith forums, which provide a platform for school leaders of all backgrounds to exchange ideas and strategies. These forums, under the leadership of Helen Stanton-Tonner, Director of Education and Inclusion, play a pivotal role in shaping strategies for fostering inclusive education.

For school leaders, interfaith dialogue offers practical benefits. It encourages reflection on the ethical dimensions of education and equips leaders with the tools to address the challenges of an increasingly pluralistic society. In non-faith schools, these principles can be applied to create an environment where all students feel valued and respected, regardless of their beliefs. This might involve designing curricula that explore ethical dilemmas, hosting assemblies that celebrate diverse traditions, or simply ensuring that the language of shared values permeates everyday interactions.





## Strategic integration of spirituality and values

Incorporating spirituality into the fabric of school life is not about imposing a particular worldview but about creating spaces where students and staff can explore meaning, purpose, and identity. This approach aligns with the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) framework, which places a strong emphasis on students' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) development. As a school leader, I have found that spirituality, when framed as an exploration of universal values, provides a powerful foundation for personal and community growth.

At my Quaker school, reflective practices such as silence and mindfulness are woven into the daily routine, offering moments for students and staff to pause and connect with their inner lives. These practices are complemented by an emphasis on environmental stewardship, a value shared by both Quaker and Catholic traditions. Projects like tree planting and energy conservation not only teach practical skills but also instil a sense of responsibility for the world we share.

In the Catholic school context, spirituality is expressed through liturgy, prayer, and acts of service, each providing opportunities for students to engage with core values like compassion and justice. For non-faith schools, similar outcomes can be achieved by designing co-curricular programmes that encourage students to think critically about ethical issues and contribute to their communities. Initiatives such as service-learning projects, ethical debate clubs, and mindfulness workshops can be tailored to reflect the unique character of each school while promoting universal values.

## Evaluating impact and sustaining change

To ensure that values-based education remains a living and evolving practice, it is essential to monitor its impact and adapt to changing needs. Feedback from students, staff, and parents provides valuable insights into how well the school's ethos aligns with its practices. Self-evaluation tools, aligned with the ISI framework, help identify strengths and areas for improvement in the delivery of SMSC development.

For non-faith schools, sustaining these changes involves embedding values into every aspect of school life. This can start with the creation of a clear and inclusive values statement that reflects the community's aspirations and ethos. Regular training sessions for staff ensure that they understand how to model and nurture these values effectively. Including moments of reflection in staff meetings and professional development days reinforces a shared commitment to these principles.

Non-faith schools can also integrate these values into their daily routines through simple, practical actions. Establishing "reflection corners" in classrooms or communal areas offers students a space to pause and think. Regular assemblies that highlight stories of resilience, empathy, and ethical decision-making help reinforce these ideals. Partnering with local organisations for community service projects fosters a spirit of collaboration and social responsibility. Celebrating diverse cultural and ethical traditions during school events creates an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect.

## Preparing students for ethical leadership

The goal of values-based education is to prepare students for lives of purpose and integrity. In the independent school sector, character formation plays a crucial role in this process, shaping students' abilities to navigate ethical dilemmas and lead with empathy and resilience. Character formation involves nurturing traits such as honesty, perseverance, and social responsibility, which can be cultivated through values-based education across the curriculum, co-curricular activities, and the hidden curriculum.

The hidden curriculum refers to the lessons students learn implicitly through the school's culture, policies, and day-to-day interactions. For example, how teachers model respect in their relationships or how the school addresses conflict sends powerful messages about values. Integrating character formation into the curriculum might involve exploring ethical questions in literature, history, and science. Co-curricular activities like community service projects, leadership roles in student councils, or participation in environmental initiatives reinforce these lessons in practical, hands-on ways. Together, these elements ensure that students leave school with both the moral grounding and the practical skills needed to lead in a complex world.

## Final reflections

As educators, our responsibility extends beyond academic achievement to the cultivation of character and community. By integrating spirituality and shared values into our leadership practices, we create schools that nurture the whole person—mind, body, and spirit. Whether rooted in faith traditions like Catholicism and Quakerism or grounded in universal principles, values-based education provides a roadmap for building compassionate, inclusive, and resilient communities.

Through the practices of reflection, dialogue, and action, we prepare students to lead lives of purpose and integrity. The concepts of mission integrity and character formation, alongside practical strategies for embedding these into school life, ensure that our schools become places where every individual can thrive and contribute to a more harmonious and just society.

Nicky Hardy is an experienced educational leader serving as Deputy Head (Pastoral) at Leighton Park School, who began teaching in 1993 as a PE teacher at an outstanding Church of England girls' school. With over three decades of teaching experience spanning various leadership roles in state and independent schools, she is a graduate of Exeter University with an MA(Ed) in Education Management and Leadership from the University of Southampton. She has held diverse positions including Head of PE, Careers, PSHE, Director of Sport, and Assistant Head, bringing an inclusive and values-driven approach to her work.



"Leadership at the school demonstrates a strong commitment to pupils' wellbeing, underpinned by the integration of Quaker values into all aspects of school life. This commitment is evident in the culture of mutual respect fostered across the community." *ISI Inspection Report*



# Professional Development

ISA offers exclusive professional development opportunities tailored for educators and leaders within independent schools. Members enjoy discounted rates on our comprehensive range of courses designed to enhance skills and broaden perspectives. By participating, you can advance your career and positively impact both students and the school community.

We are delighted to provide a diverse selection of online development options covering a wide array of topics. Each course combines expert knowledge, many with valuable networking opportunities.

## Cost

The rate for most online courses is £130 / £160 (Member / non-Member rate) per delegate.

## How to book

For more information on our programme and to book, visit the website at [www.isaschools.org.uk/events](http://www.isaschools.org.uk/events)

### Leading an AI Confident School: A holistic approach to responsible AI in Education

9.30am – 3pm 4 March 2025 Zoom

### Sound financial planning for any eventuality

9.30am – 3pm 10 March 2025 Zoom

### Marketing and Admissions - Maximising your output

9.30am – 3pm 12 March 2025 Zoom

### Learning: Super Scribes - Early Mark Making

9.30am – 3pm 13 March 2025 Zoom

### Leadership Pathway/ Senior Leadership Pathway [SLP/LP]

Using self-evaluation measures for  
school improvement

9.30am – 3pm 7 March 2025 Zoom

### Senior Mental Health Lead [MHP]

Mental Health First Aid (2 Day)

9.00am - 5.00pm 26 – 27 March 2025 ISA House,  
Great Chesterford, CB10 1PF

### Equity, Diversity, Inclusion Pathway [EDIP]

Racism, Bias, and Providing Culturally  
Sensitive Services

9.30am – 3pm 29 April 2025 Zoom

## Conference

### Annual Conference

8 – 10 May 2025 Harrogate Majestic Hotel

The conference programme will be packed with a variety of engaging and informative speakers, and will also include the Association's AGM, and Annual Dinner. This is a wonderful opportunity to enjoy some networking, to be inspired, and to share in the unique fellowship of ISA.

### Deputy and Assistant Heads Conference 2025

13 – 14 March 2025 Wyboston Lakes - The Willows  
Training Centre, MK44 3AL

This conference offers valuable insights and knowledge from a variety of speakers, providing you with the necessary tools and strategies to excel in your role. Deputies and Assistant Heads will gain practical guidance from distinguished speakers, engage in thought-provoking discussions, and network with like-minded professionals.

## ISA / ISC Digital Conference 2025

9am – 5pm 19 June 2025 Roehampton University, London, SW15 5PJ

This conference is designed to bring together school leaders from across a wide range of contexts, regardless of where they are on their digital journey. Our aim is to help leaders navigate the sometimes murky waters of EdTech so they can go away well-informed and confident about progressing with their own digital strategies.





## ISA Accreditations

Our Professional Development Programme provides high-quality training opportunities for a wide range of school staff, promoting excellence in independent education across the board. ISA accreditations help support our Members and their staff in a range of different areas, providing professional development opportunities that keep schools up to date and add value to staff's credentials.

Providing high-quality continuous professional development (CPD) for staff is an essential tool for schools to maintain best practices, foster excellence in education and keep a competitive edge.

**The ISA Certificate for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Lead** recognises the need for current, detailed and supportive professional development to ensure those who take a leading role in this area develop their skills and knowledge effectively. It is designed to enable all those who have an interest in equity, diversity and inclusion within their setting to maintain best practice.

**The ISA Certificate for Senior Mental Health Lead** ensures School Leaders remain current and have opportunities to develop a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. The scheme aligns with the full DfE specifications for the role and is designed for senior staff with the role of Mental Health Lead within their setting.

**The ISA Certificate in Advanced School Leadership** recognises excellence in Senior Leadership and celebrates a continuing commitment to drive personal improvement. It is open to those leaders (both members and non-members) who wish to develop their skills and knowledge in school leadership.

**The ISA Certificate in School Leadership** is designed for aspiring school leaders who are committed to continuous improvement. It's open to both ISA members and non-members, providing a valuable pathway to develop your leadership skills and knowledge. Earning this certificate demonstrates your dedication to professional growth and showcases your advancing leadership capabilities.



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# ISA Awards 2025

**Submissions open 3 March**

**Presented at the Autumn Study Conference in November**

**Find out more about ISA Awards**



# Shaping the Future of Independent School Catering.

How the latest research from apetito and the ISA is helping schools tackle catering challenges

Rupert Weber, General Manager of apetito's Education Division looks at the new research report being launched by apetito and Independent Schools Association.

Providing nutritious, high-quality meals that fuel learning and wellbeing is at the heart of every independent school's catering provision. But with rising costs, staff shortages, and increasing dietary needs, many schools are facing unprecedented challenges.

To better understand the landscape, apetito and the Independent Schools Association (ISA) have partnered to launch a major research study: The Independent School Catering Report: Shaping the Future. This landmark report dives deep into the key issues shaping independent school catering today, providing data-driven insights, best practices, and strategies to help schools navigate these challenges effectively

This research comprised of six themed modules which covered the following topics: The Current Landscape of School Catering; Food Quality; Pupil and Parental Engagement; Cost and Efficiencies; Food Safety and Allergies and Food Education. In this piece, I'm going to be diving into some of the headline findings of the report.

## The Three Biggest Challenges Facing Independent Schools

When we began examining the data what stood out immediately that there were three clear priorities, which were far and away the most critical considerations for independent schools when it comes to school catering. These were cost, quality and nutrition.

### 1. The Cost Challenge: Schools Under Pressure

Unsurprisingly, managing costs is the issue causing schools the most headaches and it is an issue that is of increasing concern for a large proportion of schools. Many schools and contract caterers are dealing with tightening budgets and are trying to cut costs. In fact,

**91%** of schools list cost within their top three challenges,

as they find it increasingly challenging to balance budget constraints and maintain meal quality. Cost-cutting measures may help balance the books in the short term, but schools need to be aware that they can have long-term consequences for pupils' health and well-being.

### 2. Quality being Sacrificed

The report shows that majority of schools rank quality as one of their top three priorities when it comes to providing school meals. However, what the data also showed us was that

**more than 2/3** schools state that achieving high-quality school meals is one of their top challenges

Rising costs and the ongoing-labour crisis are having a real impact, with schools finding it increasingly harder to offer high-quality meals that give pupils the fuel they need to learn, and, in too many cases, school menus are lacking variety and nutritional balance.

### 3. Nutrition Matters

Ensuring that meals are nutritious and support the health and well-being of students is another top priority for over 80% of schools. Schools are increasingly focused on offering a variety of balanced and healthy meal options to ensure that pupils are offered a nutritious meal. Whilst this aspiration is to be applauded, the research does uncover that

**25%** of schools are concerned that their pupils' nutritional needs are not being met

and nearly 1 in 3 schools don't have a positive view of the variety of their school meal options, which shows there is room for improvement in a significant number of independent schools.

## More Than Just Challenges:

### Solutions & Opportunities

As schools strive to meet the diverse dietary needs of their pupils, this report uncovers that many have adopted a variety of interesting strategies to ensure they provide nutritious and appealing meals, that remain cost

effective. This section looks at the innovative practices, solutions and opportunities employed by schools to deliver high quality school meals.





## The Impact of Labour shortages

The findings of this report highlight that the on-going volatility of the labour market has been having a real impact on school kitchens. *70% of schools* list labour shortages in their top three catering challenges and it's easy to understand why. Brexit, followed by the pandemic has created an industry-wide shortage of skilled catering staff and schools are really feeling the brunt of these shortages. Interestingly, over half the schools who rely on contract catering services stated that they also felt impacted by staff shortages, demonstrating how even outsourcing services doesn't protect school kitchens from understaffing.

## Catering to Different Dietary Needs

The research shows that independent schools' commitment to food safety and the accommodation of dietary needs is evident. Accommodating dietary needs is a strength for most schools and it is a real positive to see that food safety is universally acknowledged as being incredibly important by *96% of schools*. However, in practice there are improvements that many schools need to make. Whilst robust policies and comprehensive staff training are in place in a number of schools, concerningly 13% of schools do not offer kitchen staff training on how to safely cater for and manage food allergies.

## The Importance of Engagement

One of the most concerning figures to come out of the research was that *1 in 4 schools* believe that pupils do not enjoy their food, which demonstrates there is a real need for a large number of schools to work harder to cater to pupils' tastes and preferences. Schools should be proactively engaging with both pupils and parents to shape their catering services. Interestingly, what is clear is those schools which do engage see higher meal uptake rates and more overall satisfaction with the catering services provided.

## Unlocking the Future: Learn how to revolutionise school meals with this free report

When we set out to begin this research, we wanted to create report which examined the true landscape of independent school catering. Partnering with the Independent School Association has allowed us to dive deep into both the challenges and successes schools face when it comes to their catering. We hope this is a valuable resource, enabling schools to share and learn from the experiences of others. This collaboration is more than research; it's a commitment to setting new standards for school catering.



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Catherine, Princess of Wales, attends the launch of the National Emergencies Trust

ALIYA AZAM

# Faith schools and the national curriculum

## The Shi'a contribution to British society

**The late Grand Ayatollah Al-Khoei was regarded as one of his generation's most learned and wise Shi'a scholars. During his lifetime, he set up the Al-Khoei Foundation to carry on working for the welfare of the Shi'a community worldwide in perpetuity. He knew that many people from Iraq had been forced into exile by the dictator Saddam Hussain, especially after the attacks on the Marsh Arabs and the first Gulf War in 1991.**

Those Shi'a Iraqis who came to settle in Britain needed to deepen their understanding of their religion and differentiate it from the culture of their homeland. To this end, he instructed that property should be bought from charitable funds and schools for boys and girls of all ages should be established.

Wisely, he knew that only by a deep knowledge of their religious tradition and a thorough grounding in modern education according to British methods and standards, could the young people of these refugees be equipped to take their place as citizens of Britain, secure in their Shi'a identity alongside their commitment to their new homeland. This was the context for establishing, in 1991, the twin schools: Al-Sadiq School for boys and Al-Zahra School for girls in the multicultural borough of Brent, in London, one of the great multicultural multi-religious cities of the world.

Many state schools in areas of high Muslim concentration are predominantly Muslim. A small number of Muslim schools have been set up by the Sunni Muslim communities with state funding. In addition, there are dozens of small or large private schools run by Sunni Muslims. Al-Sadiq and Al-Zahra schools are the only Shi'a schools in Britain that offer the National Curriculum.

As a Shi'a school, we have the same kind of prayerful character to the day found in many religious schools: morning assemblies, recitation from our scripture, commendation of our learning to God at the start of each lesson, special attention paid to seasons of the year with their religious observance, and particular days on

which we remember great religious leaders of the early centuries of Islam.

These religious practices are not an end in themselves but rather a spur to bring forth the fruits of faith and our understanding of the world in action to serve humanity. Our students are involved in a wide range of community service projects with both a local outreach and a worldwide view of those who suffer in many ways today; our special focus is on orphans as this enables the students to grow in empathy for their fellows in other lands.

This is part of the schools' ethos, but it goes wider than that. We aim to produce young men and women who are aware of people who follow other religions and none, as well as Muslims of the Sunni tradition. We have partnerships in place for projects and encounters with Jewish and Christian schools, as well as with state schools with majority Sunni students.

We are producing citizens of Britain; therefore, we take advantage of our presence in the capital to visit institutions like Parliament and the Royal Courts of Justice as well as inviting a flow of speakers from various aspects of public life. We are proud of our record of inviting members of the Royal family, parliamentarians, and leading religious figures. Our choir has performed on several occasions in front of members of the royal family and parliamentarians. We have brought people of other faiths together in several faith school conferences and through sports working with the FA and the Arsenal football club.

Although classified as an independent school, these schools are much better thought of as 'community schools' because they could not run without the financial support of their founding charity and gifts from other benefactors. The fees paid by parents are only £5,000 per annum for the primary departments and £7,000 per annum for the secondary. Such fees do not cover the cost of educating children to the standards demanded by the teachers,





schools, or government. They require a sacrificial commitment by teachers and other staff, who are not paid on the same scale as state-funded or 'independent' schools.

And by community, we don't only mean the Shi'a community but the wider community. We have been actively engaged in interfaith initiatives, fostering understanding and cooperation among students from diverse backgrounds. Organisations like the Faith and Belief Forum have developed innovative programmes such as school-linking projects, conferences, and creative collaborations. These initiatives, which have involved schools like Al Sadiq, Al Zahra, Bishop Ramsey, and Swaminarayan, aim to promote dialogue and mutual understanding through activities ranging from art and music projects to working together for the greater good.

The core objective of these interfaith efforts is to prepare students to become engaged and empathetic citizens in multicultural Britain. By creating safe, inclusive environments, these programmes help young people build confidence, develop transferable skills, and explore their identities while learning to respect and understand diverse cultural and religious perspectives. Projects often involve collaborative activities that encourage participants to reflect on shared human values, promoting social cohesion and citizenship.

We welcome questions which may be hard to answer but all will lead to mutual understanding in the end. It's a tall order, for sure but for younger generations it begins in their classrooms. Religious Education classes build knowledge and understanding not just of other faiths but of different areas of common human experience. Our community engages in this cohesion in as transparent a manner as possible and it must be understandable to all who observe it. We must begin by teaching our students to differentiate between Islam and their inherited family culture. Once we have begun to separate the two, our children who have a more concrete understanding of our multi-faith British culture than we do can lead by example.

Our pupils already are commemorating national symbolic occasions as part of our curriculum. For example, we led an assembly commemorating Remembrance Sunday and read poems in a cemetery in our local Church with pupils from other schools. Community cohesion is central to Islamic thinking and always has been. Even if we are of the same faith or not, we are all on our own spiritual journeys.

The diversity within our faith and the riches of other faiths are all valid ways that God has guided human communities. By accepting that, we understand our human responsibility, as custodians and stewards of creation. By combining pupils' understanding of their faith with their understanding of their community as it is, we can set a caring, supportive and enlightening example for a twenty-first-century, post-secular classroom.

However, the Government's policy of adding VAT to fees and associated issues such as the ending of business rates relief endangers all of this. Some parents will find the additional burden simply beyond their means and they will transfer their children to the state-funded sector in Brent, thus placing an additional burden on the public purse. There simply is no charitable funding available in effect to reduce the fees to keep the contribution paid by parents at the existing level. At the current levels of income, there is no margin to reduce expenses to make savings.

Worse still, if the Al-Sadiq School and Al-Zahra School could be forced to close or to radically transform themselves - for example in the voluntary-funded sector - into something other than foundations with a Shi'a ethos, that permeates both the National and hidden curricula. This would be a great loss, not only to our community but to the future of British society.



Aliya Azam is a distinguished educator and interfaith leader with extensive academic credentials in psychology, Islamic studies, and education. With over three decades of experience in secondary science education, she has served on multiple national boards and been recognised for her community cohesion efforts. She holds a BSc (Hons) in Psychology from University College London (UCL), an MA in Islamic Societies and Cultures from SOAS, a PGCE in science from the Institute of Education as well as a BA in Islamic Studies and is currently studying Advanced Hawza Islamic Seminary Studies.

Her professional roles include Interfaith Coordinator at the Al-Khoei Foundation, Trustee of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, and representative of the Muslim community in various national initiatives. In 2015, she was honoured with an MBE for community cohesion with the Al Khoei Foundation. She represented the Shi'a Muslim community at the Faith Leaders Procession during the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II and the Coronation of King Charles III.



# Maximising School opportunities, **minimising costs** and **liabilities** as a VAT registered business

Many Independent schools are exploring ways to reduce the impact of VAT. Options include mergers and acquisitions to streamline the cost of operations or passing costs to parents while maintaining their school's competitive edge. Recently, schools have adopted various strategies: some share the burden, some passing on the cost in school fees and some cut their operational costs to avoid passing on VAT costs. Unfortunately, in some cases, some schools have had to close.

However, being VAT registered has its advantages. School businesses can now reclaim VAT on their capital projects. This allows for cost-effective refurbishments or an option to build further accommodation, enhancing marketability and increasing capacity and revenue.

Additionally, schools are finding ways to generate extra income by repurposing or selling their assets. This could involve leasing parts of their assets for commercial use or selling parts of their land for residential development.

Before taking any action, we recommend consulting a qualified chartered surveyor. Accurate property valuations are crucial in providing the information for school leaders to make well informed decisions on their financial strategy. Whether that is for potential purchases, sales, new developments or partnerships. Our multidisciplinary team can help you navigate these challenges.

## Our expert advisors can help you with...



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JAMES WILDING

# Leading with AI

## A Headteacher's vision for the future of learning

### AI tools and the curriculum

Since the arrival of digital technologies, they have been used to assist learning in all areas of life, including the curriculum. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has been there from the start too. Who can forget the helpful little paperclip that came with Windows '97, for example? Over the last 10 years or so, with the arrival of suites of cloud-based tools, the presence of a helping hand at the side has become very obvious, with spell checks, suggestions, reminders, reimagining and all sorts.

The arrival of the latest series of AI tools has introduced us to 'Agentive Intelligence', which has accelerated the speed by which new materials can be created and shared. Initially, corporations hoped to make 'cut-down' versions freely available, such as ChatGPT and Gemini, but the arrival of DeepSeek from China has quickly taken the value of monetisation away, as has the incorporation of AI into thousands of APPs for devices and the web. I have split the advice that follows into 3 sections: Years 2 and below, Years 3 to 6 and Years 7 to 10.

Under 8 - The UK's obsession with the development of Literacy and Numeracy, at the expense of the development of the other life skills children need to acquire is well documented, and the development of the EYFS stage to include physical development measures was a great improvement in 2021. It's clear that learning how to 'make one's mark in clay' has been vital for 7 millennia, and more than ever, keeping younger children off the grid is vital. Learning to sing, dance, play and ride the journey together builds resilience, of course, though I don't underestimate the value of screens for children whose educational needs are different. I've seen such progress when children have been able to talk to the school dog or 'Merlyn'; the value of non-judgemental witnesses cannot be ignored. Reporting software for teachers, of course, is incredibly time-saving, with parents receiving valuable feedback promptly as well as meeting statutory requirements.

The Year 3 to 6 curriculum is now well supported by a raft of valuable tools. DfE published guidance this January <https://schl.cc:443/gD>, which schools should consider, and I include 3 clear statements for review:

- Generative AI has demonstrated that it can help the education workforce by reducing some of the administrative burdens that hard-working teachers, staff and school leaders face in their day-to-day roles.
- Research demonstrates that generative AI could also be used for tasks such as feedback and tailored support in schools.
- Evidence is still emerging on the benefits and risks of pupils and students using generative AI themselves. We will continue to work with the education sector to develop an understanding of effective and safe use cases.

The vast amount of AI advice available online can be overwhelming. You've likely encountered resources like TeacherToolkit (<https://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk>), ScreenPal (<https://screenpal.com>) and ClassTechTips (<https://classtechtips.com/>) by Dr Monica Burns, and – all offering valuable insights. I like Monica's advice because she signposts plenty of great teaching tips which don't use AI too!

The 3 major Generative AI tools in use are ChatGPT, Gemini (from the US) and now DeepSeek (from China). All 3 are huge Large Language Models, with vast access to unrestricted data, and I urge caution with their use at Primary Level. My choice of Merlyn Mind as a provider is driven by the company's choice to use a much smaller LLM, which is directed to use restricted data sets approved by the company and, in due course, by the school. It's a class-based tool, used by the teacher in combination with a microphone wand, and children's access to private research is highly restricted. The latest actions by oligarch owners of X and Facebook to remove scrutiny and validation of content is a worrying trend I hope is not followed by others. Experienced teachers will continue to use Learning by Questions, PurpleMash, Accelerated Reader and other responsible providers, and new players such as Elastik enable assessments to be undertaken to show where in the curriculum a child's gaps might have appeared.

At the secondary level, the arrival of the LLMs has made lesson preparation a breeze, and I have 2 main recommendations among so many you could opt for.



NotebookLM - NotebookLM is an experimental AI-powered notebook developed by Google. It uses the documents you upload to train a specialized AI, allowing you to:

- Summarise long documents or articles.
- Search across your documents using natural language queries.
- Ask questions about your documents and get informative answers.
- Generate ideas and brainstorm new concepts based on your content.

Think of it as a virtual research assistant that can help you understand and work with your information more efficiently. Toolfinder.co.uk has produced this helpful video guide - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSm2IO\\_1Fg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSm2IO_1Fg)

MagicSchool - here's its PR: "The award-winning, most used, and most loved AI platform for schools in the world. Educators use MagicSchool to help lesson plan, differentiate, write assessments, write IEPs, communicate clearly, and more. And now use MagicSchool for Students to drive student outcomes and build AI literacy with responsible AI experiences built and monitored by teachers."

Its founder, Adeel Khan, has produced a simple walkthrough video which shows how all his tools work - that's an education in itself and worth watching! [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_QOI9zuskw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_QOI9zuskw)

## Teachers alert!

It takes time to familiarise yourself with these tools. Where possible, I do seek free or low-cost training because all the bugs and pitfalls are shown along the way. You can find plenty of free courses on YouTube of course, and ISA and other providers give you opportunities to learn guided by experts.

## The dangers of digital devices in the 21st century - a cautionary tale

The modern mobile phone gives every user access to the most powerful stimulants 'endorphins', giving rise to a range of highly addictive behaviours, access to digital tools that can be used to cause great harm and of course contact with a world of completely uncensored information inhabited by vicious criminals who are intent on causing harm for financial gain and notoriety. "Beware the user" should be on every device.

## Here is a story from the past.

Throughout the centuries until 1920, the use of opiates was prevalent in society, commonly sold from corner shops and to be found in every GP bag. Laudanum was a mixture of opium and high-proof alcohol that would have been taken to cure and ease all manner of symptoms, from diarrhoea to teething pains in children. It was regularly used for suicide, yet considered ideal as a mixture in small doses to assist teething pains and soothe baby to sleep. Charles Dickens used the backdrop of Victorian England to create serialised novels, which in turn were plagiarised into cheap new sheets called Penny Dreadfuls, described as "the most alluring and low-priced form of escapist reading available to ordinary youth".



ISA member since 1990, and Headteacher since 1981, James has been developing the use of digital technology in the classroom since then, following the arrival of the Sinclair ZX81. With the encouragement of the association, he wrote a weekly digital newsletter, the ISANET, in 2008, and since his graduation from Google Teacher Academic in 2012 has been evangelising for the use of Google's ecosystem. The QR code takes you to an early advert made for Google, highlighting James' efforts in this field. For 4 years, James has been working with Merlyn Mind and C-Learning to develop the next set of tools for use in the classroom, with a core focus on Primary Education. The latest AI tool for managing the classroom he advocates is Merlyn Origin; his colleague Jawad Laouira, Deputy Head Academic at Claires Court Juniors presented the school created at BETT25, and as this classroom tool is taken up across the world, the school hopes to remain at the forefront of this new practice in the classroom. Link to film here - <https://schl.cc:443/gC>



## EVENTS COMING UP IN 2025

### FOOTBALL

U11 Boys - St George's Park - 12 March  
U11 Girls - Saint Nicholas - 11 June  
U13 Girls - Lingfield College - 6 May

### HOCKEY

U11 Boys - Lee Valley - 30 January  
U13 Boys - Lee Valley - 4 February  
U15 Boys - Lee Valley - 6 February

### RUGBY

U16 Boys - Westonbirt School - 13 February  
U18 Boys - St James Boys' Ashford - 5 March  
U13/U14 Boys - St James Boys' Ashford - 6 March  
U12 Boys - Teddington - 25 March  
U14 Girls - Teddington - 28 March

### ESPORTS

U9-U16 - Lycée International de Londres - 8 February

### CROSS COUNTRY

U9-U16 - Mallory Park, Leicestershire - 9 March

### NETBALL

U14 Girls - University of Nottingham - 6 March  
U16 Girls - University of Nottingham - 11 March  
U11 Girls - King's High, Warwick - 13 March  
U18 Girls - University of Nottingham - 14 March  
U13 Girls - King's High, Warwick - 21 March

### CLAY PIGEON

U13-U18 - Bredon School - 28 March

### TRIATHLON

U9-U18 - Ipswich High School - 2 May

### TENNIS

U13 - New Hall School - 14 May  
U15 - New Hall School - 15 May

### TOUCH RUGBY

U13/U15 - Maidenhead RFC - 10 June

### GYMNASTICS

U9/U11 - Adcote School - 11 May

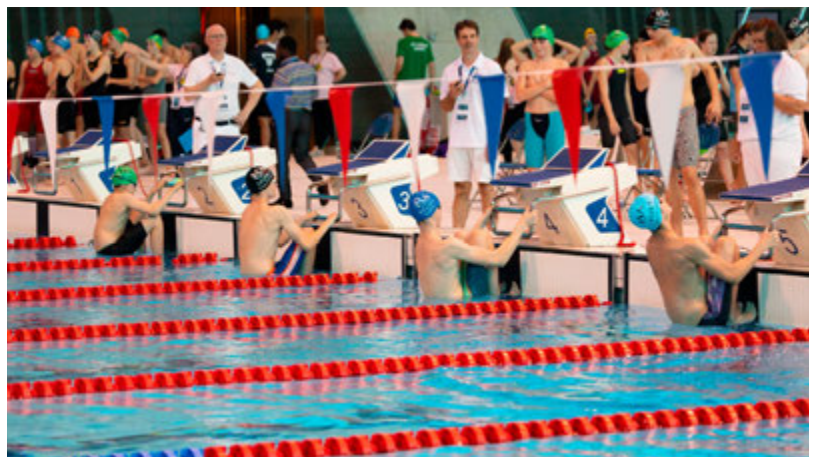
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updates.

X ISASPORTUK

IG ISASCHOOLSSPORT

## Dive into a decade of aquatic excellence

ISA recently celebrated our 10th year partnering with the London Aquatics Centre as they once again hosted our annual National Swimming Finals. ISA North emerged victorious, finishing top out of all seven ISA areas. The event saw an impressive 519 students from 145 schools shattering 15 national records. A special thanks goes to Manola Restivo and the dedicated students from Bishop Challoner School, whose volunteer efforts ensured the event's seamless execution. This milestone celebration showcased the enduring legacy of the London 2012 Olympics, with the iconic venue continuing to inspire and nurture swimming talent across the nation.



## Para Events:

Para opportunities are available for some of our larger events, such as athletics, swimming, and triathlon. You can always discuss the options available for your students with the ISA Sport team.





# ISA | SPORT Roundup

## EVENTS COMING UP IN 2025

### EQUESTRIAN

U9-U18 – Princethorpe College – 24 & 25 May

### CRICKET

U13 Girls – Gosfield School – 3 June  
U15 Boys – St James Boys', Ashford – 11 June  
U13 Boys – St James Boys', Ashford – 12 June  
U15 Girls – Gosfield School – 17 June  
U18 Girls & Boys – Gosfield School – 19 June

### GOLF

U18 – Worksop College – 19 June

### ATHLETICS FINALS

U9-U18 – Alexander Stadium – 16 June

### INCLUSIVE FESTIVAL WITH POWER2INSPIRE

U12/U13 – Leighton Park School – 17 June  
U11-U14 – Finborough School – 2 May

### INCLUSIVE FESTIVAL OF SPORT 2025

U11+ – University of Nottingham – 24 & 25 June

## AREA SPORTS COORDINATORS

### EAST ANGLIA

Marc Holland | Woodlands School, Hutton Manor

### LONDON NORTH

Sophie Martin | Knightsbridge School

### LONDON SOUTH

TBC

### LONDON WEST

Kevin Long | Boundary Oak School

### MIDLANDS

Sarah Dicksee | Dixie Grammar School  
Neil McCollin | Princethorpe College

### NORTH

Nick McMahon | Hipperholme Grammar

### SOUTH WEST

Richard Thomas | Bournemouth Collegiate  
David Tomlinson | Bournemouth Collegiate

Follow us on X @ISAsportUK and  
Instagram @isaschoolssport for more  
updates.

X ISASPORTUK

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ISA Sport is committed to providing equal sporting opportunity for all pupils at Members' schools, and 2024/2025 builds on the launch of inclusive events last year. Inclusivity is at the heart of our Association, and we are working closely with valuable partners such as Power2Inspire and the University of Nottingham to grow the inclusive offer for students in your schools.

ISA hopes that positive experiences in such events provide the platform to build confidence and social interaction. Find out about some of this year's opportunities below.

### Power2Inspire Sports Festival

Year 7 and 8 students receiving SEND support can join us and Power2Inspire for an inclusive sports event at Leighton Park School or Finborough School. In its third year, the event will include sports such as Boccia, Goalball, Kwik Cricket and sitting volleyball. All pupils will come away with t-shirts, medals and certificates for taking part.

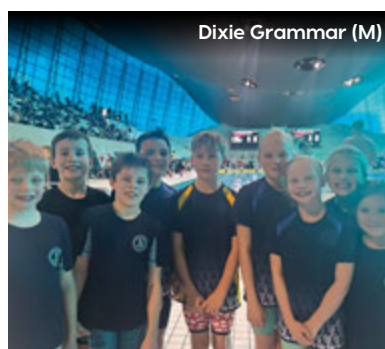
Tuesday 17 June 2025 at Leighton Park School or Friday 2 May 2025 at Finborough School. Find out more details and register here: <https://www.isaschools.org.uk/sport/inclusive-sport/inclusive-festival-with-power2inspire.html>

### Inclusive Festival of Sport (Residential)

The ISA Inclusive Festival of Sport returns for 2025 on 24-25 June. Once again, this will take place at the University of Nottingham, with the support of their inclusive delivery team. For year 6+ students, this is a residential two-day festival that offers adapted sports in a non-competitive environment, including all meals and accommodation. Last year students enjoyed a variety of sporting activities including archery, climbing, and wheelchair basketball, and new activities are in store for this year.

### The ISA Inclusive Festival of Sport

Find out more information here: <https://www.isaschools.org.uk/sport/inclusive-sport/inclusive-festival-of-sport.html>



Dixie Grammar (M)



Scarisbrick Hall (N) ISA U15 Rugby



Weston Green (LS) U11 Girls Hockey



Kings High (M)  
ISA National Badminton



LUKE DONNELLAN

# Embracing diversity

## Understanding humanism

**The 2021 Census revealed that 37% of the population now consider themselves to be non-religious (a figure that often comes out higher in many other surveys) – and the younger you are, the less religious you are likely to be. There has therefore never been a stronger case for ensuring that young people have the opportunity to learn about non-religious approaches to life as part of a rich and balanced education about religion and worldviews.**

This necessity was acknowledged in the Commission on Religious Education's (CoRE) report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward* (2018), a proposal which has driven much of the subsequent narrative in RE circles, culminating in the new Religion, Values, and Ethics curriculum in Wales, and the RE Council of England and Wales' National Content Standard (2023) (as well as influencing Ofsted's Research Review into Religious Education (2021)). It is also already happening in many schools. In 2016 just 36% of primary schools in England were teaching about non-religious worldviews; by 2024 that had leaped to 71%. In secondary schools, non-religious worldviews are taught about as commonly and, in some cases, more commonly than some of the world's major religions at Key Stage 3. There is still some way to go, but the direction of travel is clear.

### Humanism

Today, the predominant non-religious worldview in the UK is humanism (around 5% of the population self-identify as 'humanist', while many more share humanist beliefs and values). What makes a worldview religious or non-religious is open to debate – it's largely a question of definition. However, humanists typically define themselves as non-religious, a core difference from many religious worldviews being the belief that knowledge, meaning, and value can be discovered solely in the human and natural world, without

the need to posit the existence of anything beyond.

Roughly speaking, the word humanist has come to mean someone who:

- Trusts the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is, therefore, an atheist or agnostic)
- Makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- Believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Humanists typically speak of how these beliefs motivate them to take action to build a fairer and better world in which everyone has the opportunity to find happiness and fulfilment in the here and now. Many campaign for human freedoms, human rights, equality, secularism, and the protection of the environment – causes they believe will support everyone to live full and flourishing lives. For humanists, help isn't going to come from outside humanity; wrongs aren't going to be put right in a life after this one. The responsibility for positive change therefore falls on human beings alone. Of course, like people of all worldviews, they also acknowledge how easy it is for us to fail to live up to our aspirations.

Today, humanism is a global movement. Humanists International is made up of humanist organisations from over 60 countries and further detail on the fundamental principles of modern humanism can be found in its Amsterdam Declaration (2022).





## The case for inclusion

Recent case law has confirmed the requirement for RE to be inclusive of non-religious worldviews. The trend towards a less religious society also supports the need. However, perhaps the most persuasive case for inclusion rests on the potential rewards, mirroring much of the general case for an education about religion and worldviews. Learning about humanism supports an academically rich curriculum, enabling young people to develop a deeper knowledge of the diverse landscape, history, and influence of religion and belief; it facilitates better understanding and social cohesion between people from different backgrounds, supporting a wider recognition of the ways different people make sense of their lives; and it can contribute to the personal development of students exploring their worldview. Teaching about humanism also supports the wider spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) development of young people.

Humanism has had a significant influence on the beliefs, behaviour, and values that exist around the world today, and humanist thinkers and ideas have played a key role in our cultural heritage and national identity. Humanist thought has helped to shape the nation in which we now live, from the foundation of the welfare state to the way we approach death, from our social values to our literature and art. The humanist Nye Bevan, for example, was the Health Secretary who introduced the National Health Service, while thinkers from John Stuart Mill to Peter Singer have provided humanist philosophies that have influenced the moral landscape.

## Teaching about humanism

For religious education teachers looking to be inclusive of the non-religious, humanism lends itself well to practical classroom teaching. It is a global movement with international relevance and a long history to be explored, and it seeks to answer many of the same questions that religions tackle, staking the claim to be a positive, coherent, non-religious approach to life. The campaigning work of humanist organisations provides rich content for study, as does the presence of humanist ceremonies to mark important moments in life (such as naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals). A wide variety of stories can also be found to illustrate the humanist approach to life.

When teaching about humanism (or the non-religious more generally) it is important to avoid the potentially restrictive religious lens through which non-religious worldviews have traditionally been explored. Time should be devoted to the beliefs and values that humanists hold (e.g. freedom, reason, empathy, making the most of the one life we have), rather than focusing on those

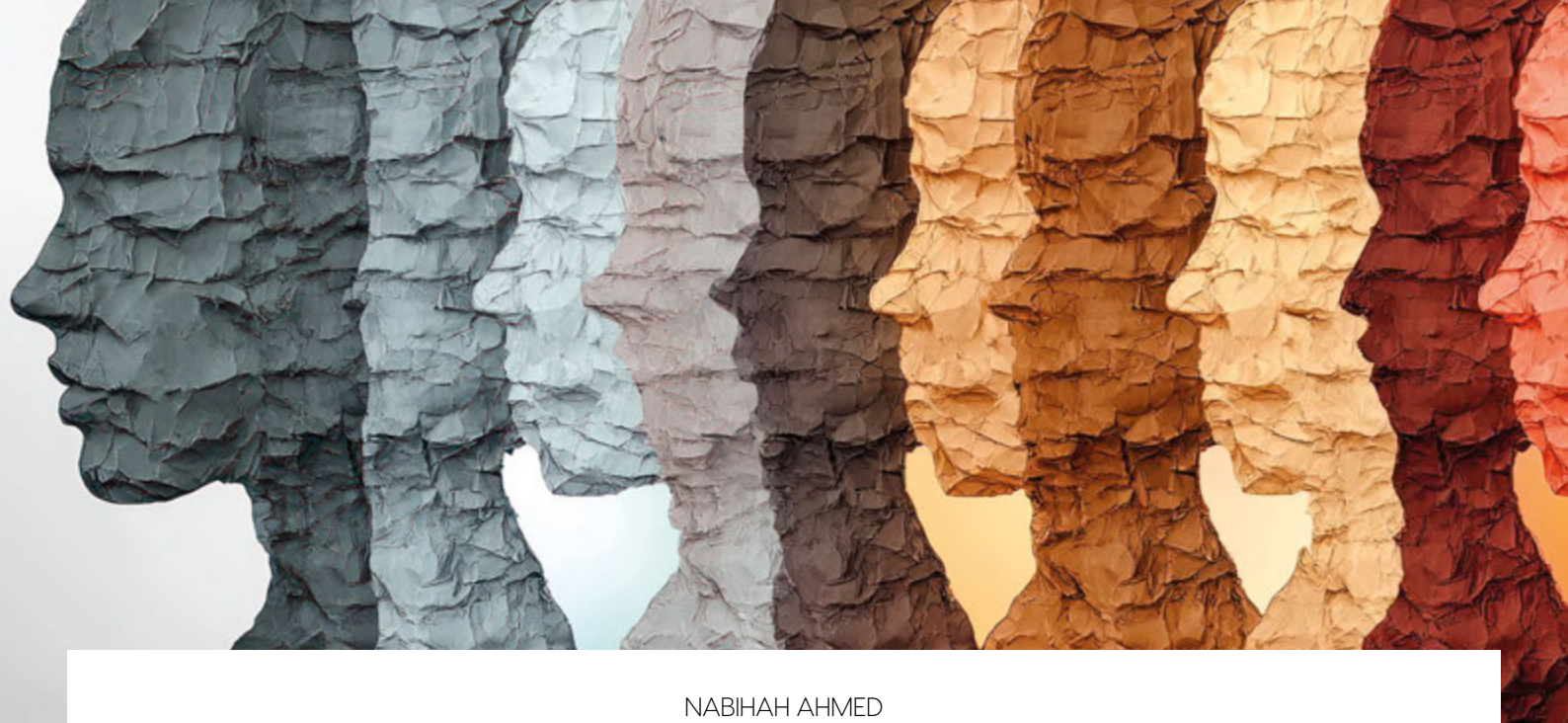
religious beliefs they might reject (e.g. a god or an afterlife). Space should be made in RE to explore people's reasons for disbelief in a deity, but this should not clutter the space devoted to teaching about non-religious worldviews. An inclusive worldview curriculum invites an understanding of how humanists attempt to answer life's big questions (on our origins, morality, and meaning) and live their lives without a belief in a god or afterlife, rather than dwelling on the reasons they might not believe. Humanism should not be simply used as a foil to religion, but seen as a worldview worthy of study in its own right. That will best support students' understanding of what it means to have a non-religious approach to life.

Taught well, humanism can help make religious education relevant to increasingly non-religious young people in an increasingly diverse society. It may even help to raise the subject's popularity among pupils and parents.

Support is available via the Understanding Humanism website where one can find a wealth of free resources to support teaching about humanism, including information sheets, presentations, films, activities, assessment ideas, and humanist perspectives on a wide range of topics and questions. Teachers can also request a visit from a free, trained school speaker who can answer students' questions, or engage in a variety of CPD options to develop their subject knowledge and pick up practical ideas for teaching about humanism in the classroom.

Luke Donnellan is the Director of Understanding Humanism at Humanists UK, where he is responsible for promoting the understanding of humanism, especially in formal education settings. He manages Humanists UK's school speakers programme, teacher training and CPD, and the production of educational resources, and speaks about humanism to a variety of audiences. He is the co-author of *Understanding Humanism* (Routledge, 2023), and editor of two online courses (*Introducing Humanism and Humanist Lives*). Before joining Humanists UK, Luke was a primary school teacher, freelance philosophy teacher, and TV Producer Director.





NABIHAH AHMED

# Building an inclusive community

## Reflections on progress and ongoing challenges

**The King Alfred School (KAS), a progressive, independent co-educational day school in North London, has long emphasised the development of the whole child. Its educational philosophy fosters a child-centred approach that nurtures creativity, individuality, and mutual respect. Central to this mission is, therefore, a robust commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), ensuring every student, staff member, and family feels valued, visible, and heard.**

While we are proud of the strides made, we remain deeply aware that creating an inclusive school community is a complex process which often requires cultural and structural change. This article reflects on our DEIB journey, exploring the successes and challenges of embedding anti-racist principles and fostering a culture of belonging.

### The strategic framework: DEIB Action Plan

At the heart of KAS's DEIB work is the annual DEIB Action Plan, which sets out a strategic vision for the school. The action plan guides long-term and short-term objectives across key areas such as recruitment, curriculum, policies, and community engagement and the relevant groups or members of staff responsible for a particular area. Also, over the last few years, our whole-school priority has been 'race' and so the action plan centres on making progress in this particular area. However, other independent schools may wish to devise an action plan that covers all protected characteristics in the Equality Act (2010) or adopt an intersectional approach when forming a strategic plan.

Whilst research does highlight the importance of a structured approach in driving systemic change (Lumby & Coleman, 2007), school leaders must recognise the need for DEIB work first so that time and resources can be allocated appropriately. Any transformative change within schools can create pushback from staff, students or families as it challenges the 'status quo'. Having all senior members of staff on board ensures that the views and feelings of these groups are heard and that they are also educated on the evidence-based need for change within their school community.

A significant step in our journey has been appointing dedicated DEIB Development Officers for both the Upper and Lower Schools.

These roles provide focused leadership and accountability, ensuring DEIB principles permeate all aspects of school life and they are expected to work closely with the DEIB Lead. Khalifa et al (2016) emphasise that leadership commitment is critical in sustaining meaningful DEIB initiatives which inform the culture of a school but also in delegating responsibilities. The presence of these roles also ensures that DEIB work remains a visible priority at every level of the school, reflecting the holistic approach needed to create lasting cultural change.

### Student voice and leadership

Student involvement has been pivotal to our progress. For two consecutive years, we have established a DEIB Student Committee that empowers young people to lead initiatives, share their experiences, and contribute to policy reviews within the school. This committee does consist of pupils from the global majority, however, the committee recruits pupils from all backgrounds from Years 10 – 13. This aligns with research demonstrating the transformative potential of student-led approaches in fostering inclusivity (Fielding, 2004). The students engage in leadership opportunities, such as, delivering assemblies, producing materials for registration sessions, attending parent forums and school council meetings and meeting with HODs for curriculum audits. Some schools may face challenges, such as, not having pupils who are interested in DEIB work or do not think their contributions will make a difference. Here, schools may find it beneficial to utilise existing student body representatives and to task them with DEIB related tasks rather than forming a separate student committee. Again, the support of senior leadership is vital in granting these committees credibility and in ensuring their voices are embedded in decision-making processes that impact their education and well-being.

Furthermore, the committee's contributions include reviewing the "KAS Against Racism" policy and leading assemblies on topics such as the Bystander Effect. These assemblies encourage active allyship and equip students with the tools to challenge discrimination. Early feedback suggests a growing willingness among students to engage in difficult conversations and advocate for equity, echoing findings that peer-led initiatives enhance awareness and empathy (Sue et al., 2019).



## Curriculum audits and anti-racism training

Curriculum reform has been another cornerstone of our DEIB efforts. This academic year, we are working on how best to evaluate the inclusivity of our curriculum, with the aim of decolonising content and ensuring diverse perspectives are represented. Lander (2011) underscores the need for such audits, noting that curriculum design significantly shapes students' understanding of identity and belonging. Through this process, we aim to address potential blind spots and ensure that all students see themselves reflected in the content they study.

Complementing this, staff undergo regular anti-racism training facilitated by external agencies. These sessions provide practical strategies for addressing bias and fostering inclusive classrooms. Students also participate in workshops exploring racial equity, helping to build a shared vocabulary and understanding across the school community. Evidence suggests that ongoing professional development is essential for creating environments where all students thrive (Bhopal & Rhamie, 2014) and in ensuring that a consistent message has been delivered to all staff. However, we recognise that training must be iterative and adaptive, ensuring it remains relevant to the evolving needs of our community and so, school leaders should also weigh up when in-house training may be more pertinent.

## External evaluation and community engagement

Recognising the value of external perspectives, we engaged a consultant to conduct an independent review of our DEIB practices. This process provided actionable insights into areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Such external evaluations, as noted by Lumby and Coleman (2007), can be instrumental in ensuring accountability and driving improvement but again, in highlighting the value and significance of DEIB work within the school. The consultant's recommendations have informed our ongoing work, providing a valuable framework for measuring progress. Furthermore, we utilise an external organisation to gather data on the impact of race on the school experience for students and staff by conducting an annual survey which then feeds into the DEIB Action Plan.

We have also prioritised listening exercises with families of colour, creating spaces for open dialogue about their experiences at KAS. Feedback from these sessions informs our policies and practices, aligning with research that highlights the importance of parent-school collaboration in advancing equity (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). These conversations have underscored the need to build trust and ensure families feel supported in raising concerns and sharing their perspectives.

## Community initiatives and visible actions

To build a shared commitment to anti-racism, we participate annually in Show Racism the Red Card's 'Wear Red Day'. This event serves as a visible reminder of our collective responsibility to challenge racism and foster inclusion. While symbolic gestures are not a substitute for systemic change, they play a role in signalling the school's values and reinforcing community solidarity (Ahmed, 2012). Alongside this, we continue to explore ways to embed anti-racist principles into everyday school life, ensuring that such initiatives are part of a broader, sustained effort.

## Challenges and areas for growth

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. Engaging all stakeholders consistently is a complex task. For instance, while the DEIB Bulletin provides staff with resources and updates, varying levels of engagement highlight the need for deeper accountability and buy-in. Gay (2018) suggests that embedding DEIB principles requires sustained professional learning and a culture of reflection which can be quite difficult to foster amidst many other educational priorities. Nonetheless, creating opportunities for informal discussions among staff may help to foster a deeper understanding of the school's DEIB goals.

While the DEIB Student Committee has been a powerful platform for student voice, we recognise the need to create more inclusive opportunities for those who may not feel confident joining formal committees. Expanding one-off initiatives and informal avenues for participation is a priority for the coming year. These initiatives could include workshops, focus groups, or creative projects that allow students to contribute in ways that feel authentic to them. Furthermore, whilst the committee has been established for two years, their work is still unknown to some members of the school community.

Staff training, while impactful, must also be more comprehensive and ongoing. Feedback indicates a need for sessions tailored to the unique challenges of leading discussions on sensitive topics. As Bhopal (2018) notes, cultural competence is not a static skill but a continuous process of learning and unlearning. We are exploring partnerships with organisations that specialise in equity but also in utilising existing expertise amongst the faculty.

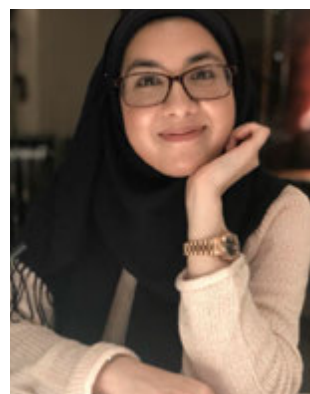
## Looking ahead

Our next steps involve embedding DEIB principles into every decision-making process at KAS. This includes revisiting policies annually, deepening our curriculum audit, and expanding training for senior leaders and governors. We are also exploring partnerships with organisations that specialise in equity and anti-racism, ensuring our work remains informed by best practices. As part of this effort, we plan to establish more formal mechanisms for tracking and evaluating the impact of our DEIB initiatives over time.

Ultimately, our goal is to cultivate a school culture where equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging are not add-ons but integral to every interaction and decision. As we continue this journey, we are guided by the belief that education must prepare students to navigate and contribute to an increasingly diverse world. By equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and empathy to engage with difference, we aim to nurture a generation of socially conscious individuals committed to creating a fairer society.

## Conclusion

The King Alfred School's commitment to DEIB reflects a broader imperative within British education to address systemic inequities and foster inclusive communities. While we have made meaningful progress, we approach this work with humility, recognising that lasting change requires sustained effort, reflection, and collaboration. By sharing our journey, we hope to inspire and learn from others within the ISA community, contributing to a collective vision of educational equity.



Nabiah is the Assistant Head of Sixth Form, Head of Sociology, and DEIB Development Officer at the King Alfred School. With eight years of teaching experience, primarily in the state sector, her background in the Social Sciences, along with the ISA EDI Pathway, equips her to support schools in developing strategic approaches to equity and inclusion.

# WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

## NEW MEMBERS

Julian Davies	Cardiff Sixth Form College	East
Sarah Galpin	Aldenham Prep School	London North
Anis Zaman	Daffodil Prep School	London North
Charu Kashyap	Odyssey House Bloomsbury	London North
Rachael Ammari	Hove Micro-School	London South
Kas Govender	Knowl Hill School	London South
Helen Dyer	TLC The Learning Centre	London South
Sarah Rollings	Heathfield School	London West
Georgios Chatzakis	Oaklands School	London West
Ricki Smith	St Gabriel's School	London West
Dahab Jihar	Hazrat Khadijatul Kubra Girls School	Midlands
Bennjamyn Smith	Kitebrook Preparatory School	Midlands
Snita Verma	The Rowan School	Midlands
Shani & Mark Ozenbrook	Watchorn Christian School	Midlands
Francesca Ellsmoor	Auckland College Independent School	North
Nicola Smith	Changing Lives	North
Chana Brown*	Manchester Jewish School	North
Georgina Barrington-Tolan	Avondale Prep School	South West
Craig Noble	Brunel College - The WASP Centre	South West
Alun Millington	Redhill High School	South West
Elle Vinall*	The White House School	South West
*Affiliate Member		

## TRANSFERS OF MEMBERSHIP

Hannah Saunders	Alleyn Court School	East
Kim Terrar	Stoke College	East
Samantha Lott	Woodlands School Hutton Manor	East
Katy Joiner	Broughton Manor Prep School	London North
Tushi Gorasia	Charterhouse Square School	London North
Paul Wilson	Coopersale Hall School	London North
Emma Redgrave	Eastcourt Independent School	London North
Matthew Foley	Hendon Prep School	London North
Rick Clarke	St James Senior Boys' School	London North
Robert Garvey	Wetherby Senior School	London North
Dani Saffer	Beechwood School	London South
Ed Dickie	Claremont School	London South
Mark Pearce	Heath House Preparatory School	London South
Rachel Bochenski	London Acorn School	London South
Gemma Davies	Oakfield Prep School	London South
Kief Ho	Octavia House School, London	London South
Graeme Smith	Ashton House School	London West
Sophie Savage	Boundary Oak School	London West



# WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

## TRANSFERS OF MEMBERSHIP

Philippa Rich	Canbury School	London West
Andrew Lawson	Caversham Prep School	London West
Robert Wallace	Crown House School	London West
James Kidd	DLD College London	London West
Lucy Price	Dolphin School	London West
Sarah Wallace	Highfield Prep School	London West
Chris Wolsey	Ibstock Place School	London West
Richard Robson	Long Close School	London West
Amy Cavilla	Radnor House Twickenham School	London West
Caroline Taylor	Sherfield School	London West
David MacMorran	Southbank International Kensington	London West
Stephen Blundell	St Mary's School	London West
Caroline Santer	The King's School, Eastleigh	London West
Jonny Gilbert	The Roche School	London West
Therese Andrews	Thomas's Putney Vale	London West
Naomi Moorcroft	Trinity Christian School Reading	London West
Jeff Smith	Abbey College in Malvern	Midlands
Nicola Tribe	Adcote School	Midlands
Andy Fyfe	Castles Education	Midlands
Martyn Wilkins	Grantham Prep School	Midlands
Andrew Allman	Lucton School	Midlands
Nicky Burrows-Berry	Newbridge Prep School	Midlands
Charlie Stafford Northcote	Pattison College	Midlands
Anna Sandford Squires	St Edward's School	Midlands
Tanya Davie	Branwood Prep School	North
Dawn Critchley	Cleavelands Prep School	North
Stuart Rees	Huddersfield Grammar School	North
Emma Arnold	Lady Lane Park Preparatory School	North
Andy Smith	Moor Allerton Preparatory School	North
Emily Alexander	Pivot Academy Kirklees	North
Tom Hutchinson	Rydal Penrhos School	North
Sara Heron	St Ambrose Preparatory School	North
David Girvan	The Firs	North
Ben Tagg	The Grange Junior School	North
Josephine Velthoven	Bishopstrow College	South West
Emma Edwards	Polwhele House	South West
Caroline Ward	Stover School	South West

## OVERSEAS MEMBERS

Ann Rispin	Rispin International School	Bishoftu, Ethiopia
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# ISA | Awards

The ISA Awards categories will open in early March. Entries close in late July and finalists will be announced in September. The ISA Awards Ceremony is held annually alongside our Autumn Study Conference, which takes place on 11-12 November 2025. The strength and popularity of the Awards reflect the growth of our Association as we continue to celebrate the brilliant independent schools that ignite minds and inspire futures. Categories reflect the breadth of provision in ISA Members' schools – highlighting the importance of diversity amongst our membership. Find out more about getting involved at [isaschools.org.uk/awards.html](https://isaschools.org.uk/awards.html).

## 2024 Winners

Congratulations to last year's ISA Awards winners who embody excellence and innovation. These schools are recognised for their commitment to nurturing young minds, fostering creativity and inspiring the changemakers of tomorrow.

### ISA Award for Excellence and Innovation in Early Years

**Little Downsend School**

### ISA Junior School of the Year Award

**Fulham Pre-Prep**

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### ISA Senior School of the Year Award

**The Faculty at Queen Ethelburga's**

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### ISA SEND School of the Year Award

**The Holmewood School**

### ISA Boarding School of the Year Award

**Cardiff Sixth Form College**

### ISA Award for Outstanding Sport (Small School)

**Maple Walk School**

### ISA Award for Outstanding Sport (Large School)

**Gosfield School**

### ISA Award for Excellence in Performing Arts

**ArtsEd**

### ISA Award for Excellence in Fine Art and Design

**Faraday School**

### ISA Award for Outstanding Engagement in the Community

**Quinton House School**

### ISA Award for Future Readiness

**Leighton Park School**

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### ISA Award for Excellence and Innovation in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

**Rosemead Preparatory School**

### ISA Award for Excellence and Innovation in Mental Health and Wellbeing

**Slindon College**

### ISA Award for Excellence in Sustainability

**Liberty Woodland School**

### ISA Award for Innovation in Independent Education

**Westbourne School**

Sponsored by Toddle



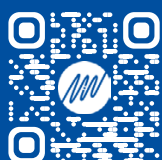


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