

GUEST COLUMN – November 2025

Culture, love and connection: what great schools get right Mike Wade

Great schools understand that systems don't build character - people do. We've learned that excellence is never accidental; it's engineered through belonging, compassion and love - the heartbeat of education that still matters most.

1. Build a culture of belonging and unconditional love

Children thrive when they belong - truly belong. In our Infants, our Heart Partner system teaches every child to notice others and understand that love is an action, not an idea. In the Juniors, that empathy widens into civic-mindedness: pupils volunteer as Dementia Friends, run community cafés and serve others because it's right. Great schools must be unafraid to say "we love you" - and to show it through connection, not control.

2. Understand neurodiversity beyond policy

Behaviour policies don't change behaviour - people do. The best schools see every child as knowable, not "manageable." Staff understand that behaviour is communication, not defiance. Using STAR analysis and Adult Response Plans, they respond calmly, decoding what a child means rather than reacting to what they've done. This isn't lowering standards - it's raising empathy and precision. Understanding neurodiversity must be a professional instinct, not an initiative.

3. Trust staff to lead from their strengths

Great schools don't run on compliance, but on confidence. We identify what every adult loves and build leadership opportunities around those passions. We give staff ownership - in curriculum, projects and culture - and then step back. When people feel trusted, they give more than their job description. Leadership is not control; it's the deliberate act of releasing talent.

4. Support parents with courage and compassion

Since Covid, schools have seen rising parental anxiety and catastrophising. Children cannot grow independent if parents are fearful. We work directly with families - offering counselling, workshops and wellbeing courses to rebuild adult resilience. The best schools hold parents in the same compassionate accountability they give pupils: listening deeply but helping them let go. True partnership demands honesty, not appeasement.

5. Make values visible and lived

Values must be more than vocabulary. Every pupil at our schools can name, describe and live our values - they see them modelled in adults and celebrated in peers. We make them tangible through assemblies, capes, stickers and shared language. Respect, kindness and resilience aren't ideals; they're habits seen and reinforced daily. Great schools make their values visible - not on posters, but in the corridors of conversation and conduct.

6. Build character through shared adventure

Confidence isn't taught; it's earned through challenge. The Infant Adventure and Quilters Quest take pupils beyond comfort - to climb, perform, lead and persevere. Every child experiences moments of triumph and self-discovery. These are not extras but investments in resilience and self-worth. Shared endeavour builds moral muscle as much as memory.

7. Live and teach the power of kindness

Kindness remains the ultimate measure of culture. It's practised, not preached. Pupils work with the elderly, support community cafés and see the ripple of generosity. They learn that kindness is not weakness - it's wisdom in action. When children learn to give, they gain the key to lifelong happiness. In an age of noise, kindness still whispers the loudest.

In the end, as every true leader knows, culture beats compliance. Always has. Always will.

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