



THE SUNDAY TIMES

THE SCHOOLS BLOG



School uniform binds a school to its community - but only if the school is true to the values it symbolises

In the week before half term, I received two letters from members of the public about pupils at my school. The first was friendly, but critical. The writer had noticed some King's boys in Wimbledon whose ties were not done up to the collar. Furthermore, last term, my correspondent went on to say, he had noticed that one had even had his shirt untucked.

Coincidentally, on the same day, I received a letter telling me that its writer had seen two boys from a local school (not King's) being "beaten up" by two older boys from the same local school. She went on to say that two King's boys aged fifteen or so had also seen what was happening. They intervened, asking the smaller boy's assailants whether they enjoyed bullying people much younger than they were, and bringing the event to a rapid conclusion through their unhesitating actions. The small boy made his way unmolested, and my second correspondent said she had been so impressed with the behaviour of the King's boys, she felt she had to write to tell someone.

Schools are public places. They are part of their local community and are at their best when they remember their role and influence within it. One reason I am strongly in favour of school uniform is not just that it works as a reminder to boys and girls that they are recognisable, and therefore partly responsible for the good name of the school they attend, but that it also binds a school in

to its community. In a world where all too many of us live almost anonymously in our communities, where many people may not even know their own neighbours, especially in busy London suburbs, to recognise a school uniform is somehow comforting: it is an aspect of the neighbourhood that changes little over the years. It recalls the presence of an often long-established school in the midst of a community, and thus acts as an implicit reminder of the importance of education and the endlessly repeated cycles of hopes, fears and dreams across generations of school children.

A recognisable uniform is also a sign by the school that it is not just proud of its identity, but of its pupils. Unlike delivery companies with complaints phone numbers on the back of their vans, we do not need to embroider a sign into pupils' jackets saying, "What do you think of my behaviour? Call 0208 XYZ and tell my headmaster". The uniform itself is our signifier, and anyone who calls the school, or writes to me, will know that their points will be heeded, or, as required, followed up.

So, as is clear, I care about school uniform, as an emblem of the school and its pupils. But I care far more about the personal courage and moral integrity that should form part of the education it symbolises. For this reason, it was the letter from my second correspondent, not the first, that I read out in assembly before we broke up for the half term break.

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