

ἀρετή “being the best we can be”



Our “Transforming Learning Culture” consultation, following my joining the school in 2007 led to our choosing the touchstone of ἀρετή, featured on our school badge, which was introduced then and, in its basic sense, meaning excellence of any kind.

The whole school community at the time – students, parents, governors and staff – were engaged in discussions about our identity, our aims, our philosophy of education, our professional responsibilities, ways of working together, our uniform and our place within the educational and the local community. What emerged from those consultations was a need to encapsulate our sense of purpose and ἀρετή, the most articulated value in Greek culture, resonated for us in school then, as it does today.

In Greek mythology, it embraces wider ideals, including moral values, the idea of excellence being intrinsically linked to the concept of perfecting oneself. In the ancient world, this notion of excellence encompasses the aspiration to fulfil purpose – becoming the best one can be – it is associated in mythology with bravery, with generosity of spirit and with achievement. The concept implies that as individuals and as a community, our actions matter: in a complex world, human value and meaning can be judged by our contribution, our efforts, behaviours and self-improvement. The word ἀρετή is analogous to deep learning – the pursuit of knowledge, in terms of self-awareness as well as academic study: the belief that studying is the highest form of happiness is particularly appropriate for a school.

Hence our simple statement to capture a complex aspiration, encompassing all the more subtle nuances of the philosophy, and encapsulating our vision that every child, whatever his or her circumstances and starting point, has unique skills and qualities and given the support, encouragement, opportunity and challenge to achieve, can do so. It is our task to create a context for them to thrive, academically, personally, socially, to experience the real joy of learning, as well as preparing them for the adult world.

Central to our school badge - designed then by one of our staff working with students – is therefore the aspiration to be the best we can be and the “touchstone” word ἀρετή. We refer in lessons, in assemblies and in conversations with students to this, as a means to think about what we do and say as individuals and as a community, not least in the sense that to be the best I can be, I have a responsibility to support others in becoming the best they can be. When new students join us, I explain the significance of the motto they wear and tell them that our school should be a better place because they are joining it. None of us is perfect, we all make mistakes and sometimes are not as effective as we want to be but we always aspire to be *the best we can be*.

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