

RO Ben Davies: Colina International School & Learner-Centred Purpose

Shift in Vision & Core Purpose

- Ben describes his shift from being a successful head of maths in a traditional UK school (focused on exam results) to realizing that students were mainly learning to pass tests, not to become better thinkers or humans.
 - That pushed him toward a more learner-centred vision of education.
 - Colina International School (formerly Colina Learning Center) in Cluj (Transylvania, Romania) was designed around three big aims for every student:
 - Becoming powerful, self-directed learners.
 - Building healthy, meaningful relationships.
 - Knowing they matter and can bring ideas to life in the real world.
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Competency-Based Model & Daily Structure

- The curriculum is built around **competencies and skills**, not just content.
 - Examples of competencies include: focus, growth mindset, self-awareness in learning, relationship-building, and impact on the world.
 - Daily life mixes:
 - **Crew time** (tutor/SEL circle): sharing feelings, resolving conflicts, setting goals, holding one another accountable.
 - **Literacy & numeracy blocks** (including some adaptive edtech/AI) for solid foundations.
 - **Project-based / expeditionary learning**: 5 big projects per year, following an expedition cycle (launch, inquiry, doing, impact), with authenticity more important than “shoehorning” curriculum.
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Bridging Idealism and Parental Realism

- To convince families, Ben insists you must:

- Show you understand **the real world** (exams, university access, local systems).
 - Offer clear pathways: what happens if a student leaves at 14, or stays to 18, whether they need national exams, IB/Cambridge routes, or none.
 - Provide optional **intensely academic clubs** for students who **want** that depth, instead of forcing everyone through the same high-stakes route.
 - **Key “epiphany” story:** A disengaged 14-year-old in Ben’s maths class, labelled a “problem student,” turned out to be running a large online gaming community with tens of thousands of users.
 - That revealed hidden leadership, creativity, and critical thinking that school was completely missing—cementing Ben’s conviction that **school must start from who students are, not from the exam syllabus.**
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AI as an Inevitable Tool

- At Colina, AI is treated as a **real, permanent part of life.**
 - Students are taught to use it thoughtfully (and safely: data/privacy, GDPR, etc.), not simply forbidden.
 - Ben notes AI can massively lower barriers—for example, a parent believes students could co-author genuine academic papers with AI support.
 - The big challenge is **pairing human intuition, ethics and purpose with AI’s cognitive power**, rather than pretending AI can be kept outside school.
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Advice to Educators Stuck in Rigid Systems

- Start with **small “hacks” and pilot projects:** a club, a lunch group, a different way of running tutor time, a small “school within the school”.
 - Understand that **leadership is a stance, not a title:** you can lead by starting things and inviting colleagues and students in.
 - Do **something** that aligns with your deeper purpose; visible authenticity tends to attract allies and slowly shifts culture.
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Key Entities Mentioned (with example URLs)

- **Colina International School / Colina Learning Center (Cluj, Romania)** – Expeditionary / project-based, competency-based international school Ben leads.
 - Website: <https://colinainternational.com>
- **Expeditionary / project-based learning (EL Education as a reference)** – The kind of long-term, real-world projects Colina uses are closely aligned with EL Education’s expeditionary model (roots in Outward Bound & Harvard).
- **Cambridge Assessment International Education** – Ben refers to preparing students for “Cambridge exams” and GCSE-style assessments; these are overseen internationally by Cambridge Assessment International Education.
 - Info site: <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org>
- **International Baccalaureate (IB)** – Mentioned as an example of systems trying to offer different pathways (e.g. IB Diploma) while still often remaining exam-centred.
 - Info site: <https://www.ibo.org>