



welbee

14 Proven Ways to

Transform

Staff Wellbeing

in Your School

Why I'm writing this report

At the time of writing this introduction, news of the global Coronavirus pandemic continues to fill the airwaves, and I'm reminded once again of the huge challenges we face in ensuring the wellbeing of school staff in increasingly uncertain and worrying times.

But I'm heartened by the renewed focus on improving the welfare of this country's key workers, of which teachers are undoubtedly high on the list, and I'm determined to support school leaders and ensure that we do not simply go back to the way things were before. Things have to change. We all have to come together to transform staff wellbeing in our schools for good.

That's why I've teamed up with three inspirational school leaders to share 14 proven and sustainable ways that you can enhance staff wellbeing in your school. Starting today.

Why staff wellbeing is important

In my experience, mention the word wellbeing to a school leader and they will automatically assume you're referring to the wellbeing of their pupils. I suppose that shouldn't surprise us. After all, everything that happens in a school is focused on improving the outcomes of our young people, and we often associate success in this regard with the selfless sacrifices staff make (in terms of their time, energy, and even their own wellbeing).

All too often, as educators, we see our wellbeing as collateral damage in the fight to ensure the young people in our care are happy and able to achieve their potential. That's not just extremely sad - it's actually counterintuitive. It forgets that happy, contented teachers and support staff are far more likely to have positive interactions with their pupils, leading to a positive impact on pupil wellbeing.



Mark Solomons, Welbee



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- A person wearing a blue jacket with white polka dots is standing on the right side of the page, writing on a whiteboard. The whiteboard has some faint red markings, including a large opening parenthesis and some illegible text. The person's right arm is raised, holding a red marker. The whiteboard is mounted on a wooden wall.
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Strategy #1:

Focus on your own wellbeing before anything else

- *Paul Jackson*

Prioritising my own wellbeing goes against my instincts, as I'm sure it does for most school leaders, but I've come to realise that if I look after my own wellbeing, then everyone around me will benefit.

My family will have a much more pleasant weekend as a result of me being in a 'better place', and the same is true for school settings. We must start with ourselves, piloting our own wellbeing just as the airline staff ask us to "Please ensure your own oxygen mask is securely in place before helping others."

We must lead by example and practice what we preach if we are to truly enhance staff wellbeing, and as a result, the wellbeing of our pupils. I'm not sure there are any 'quick wins' when it comes to improving wellbeing across your school, but I do feel it is vital to create the right culture in the workplace.



Strategy #2:

Create a culture of positivity and kindness

- *Paul Jackson*

Sadly, we are surrounded by a lot of negative energy in today's busy world. Even before the Coronavirus pandemic, the average staff member's journey to work was less than inspiring – heavy traffic, dark mornings for much of the year, and miserable news headlines.

As people, we are more productive and happier when surrounded by positivity. We need to focus on the great things around us, becoming 'glass half-full' people. As school leaders, we have to fight against the negativity.

Creating a general culture of kindness, happiness, and positivity is easier than it sounds, but it cannot be taken for granted, especially in schools that are serving challenging communities.

Leading by example is essential here. The school leaders must remain positive at all times, even if behind closed doors, they just want to scream! Smiles are important, saying good morning is important, holding a door open for others is important, asking somebody about their weekend and being genuinely interested in their reply is important. It's the simple things that matter.

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“As people, we are more productive and happier when surrounded by positivity.”

As my mum would say, “Kindness costs nothing. Treat others as (or better than) you would want to be treated yourself.” Most importantly, do not put this off. Do not add ‘be kind’ to your to-do list. Just do it and do it now. Everyone benefits!

Here are some suggestions for supporting this...

Weekly staff shout-outs

As part of our weekly Friday whole-staff briefing, I ask each of our Key Stage Leaders to identify a standout member of staff during the past week. I read out the name and the reason for the shout-out. Staff have taken it upon themselves to applaud the individuals. We then stick the post-it note with the individuals' good deed onto a wall in the staff room for everyone to see.

At times, we have a specific focus for the following week's shout-out, such as those who've made a significant impact on SEND support, educational visits, or maths learning, to name a few. At other times, it is a general comment.

The impact of this approach is not just limited to the recognition that staff receive for their good work. The greater impact lies in the fact that it encourages our leaders to look for positive activity throughout the week, seeing all those wonderful little daily actions that they might otherwise miss, and that it makes all staff feel good when hearing the great things that are happening around the school.

How many small but wonderful things are happening every day in our schools that currently go unnoticed because we've trained ourselves to look for the negatives? Re-tune staff to look for the positives and you'll be amazed at the impact it can have.



Kindness week

Once per year, we have a focused ‘random acts of kindness week’, where we remind ourselves what it feels like to be kind, and, importantly, what it feels like for someone to be kind to us. During this week, every member of staff is given a pack of thank you cards and asked to write and give out all ten cards during the week.

We have a set of simple prompts which staff are encouraged to undertake during the week, including:

- Make a cup of tea for someone you wouldn’t usually make one for.
- Ask someone who you’ve never or rarely spoken to before how their day was.
- Leave a sweet treat on someone’s desk.

While we make a huge focus on that single week, we find many of the acts continue throughout the rest of the year.

A ‘good news’ Twitter feed

Social media has so many negative connotations, but for a school, it is a great way to celebrate good news. We aim to post at least one positive tweet every day, such as a celebration of pupils’ work, an activity that is happening, an educational visit, or a visitor to the school. There are so many great things happening around all our schools.

I encourage staff to send me photos and a short line on anything positive happening to post on Twitter. This means that we have an ongoing record of all the great things happening, but also that staff members are focussed on the positive. They are actively looking for great things to celebrate. And when I’m feeling down, I scroll back through the Twitter feed – it cheers me up and makes me feel proud of all that we are doing.

Strategy #3:

Make praise part of every day

- *Mark Eager*

Walking around the school and talking to staff, it was so easy to focus on what hadn't been done that day, what had gone wrong, and the misbehaviour of pupils. It was also clear that we were all rushing, with our heads down, from one meeting or classroom to another.

I asked myself and others how many staff members we had praised that day. We are often good at this with pupils, but we noticed we weren't applying the same skills with team members and colleagues. I know that well-delivered, regular, and authentic praise and recognition improves engagement and performance. Yet we were missing out on this when it came to our staff.

We set a shared goal for all our leaders to catch three staff members doing something right each day and sharing this with each other. It has proved to be infectious and had a big impact. In my view, it's the fastest way to build staff wellbeing into the school culture.



“Well-delivered, regular, and authentic praise and recognition improves engagement and performance.”

Strategy #4: Measure staff wellbeing

- *Mark Eager*

If you are going to make a difference to staff wellbeing, you must know where you are now and what needs to change.

We could see from our school data that we looked to be doing okay. But things weren't perfect - we had difficulties in recruiting staff in some subjects, like many schools, and staff absences were around the average for the county.

Yet we were also listening to staff concerns on workload and were seeing more instances of absences relating to stress. We were taking action, but we wanted to better understand what staff thought we were doing well and where any improvements would have the biggest impact.

We ran an evidence-based anonymous survey that provided scores and benchmarks so we could see how well we were doing in building a workplace and environment where our staff could do their best work. We were also provided with suggested strengths, focus areas, and recommended actions.

This provided a framework for us to focus on the causes of poor staff wellbeing, rather than the symptoms, and to start to make it simply part of what we do each day and how we work.

That was nearly a year ago, and we have recently run the survey again. Scores in each area rose significantly. Comments from staff recognised the impact that had been made and how changes had benefited them and their pupils.

While we didn't get everything right and we still have work to do, we have moved a long way. The focus is on how we do things and the culture we have created, rather than having to do more. Wellbeing is not about adding tasks to everyone's list of things to do.

“If you are going to make a difference to staff wellbeing, you must know where you are now and what needs to change.”

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Strategy #5: Focus on behaviours

- *Mark Eager*

One of our big changes over the last year has been to focus much more on why and how we do something, rather than what we do. We were introduced to research and a set of leadership competencies that have been proven to prevent and reduce staff stress.

We used these to look again at our school values and articulated specifically what behaviours we would expect to see from everyone in school. Starting with the senior leadership team and then working with middle leaders, we created a subset of these behaviours and carried out training to ensure everyone engaged with and used them.

They also became part of our performance management as an objective of how tasks were delivered and how we coached our leadership team and staff.

Other leaders and I do not always get this right. Though as a roadmap, it has worked really well in engaging all our staff and improving our culture. Feedback from staff is clear - they feel more than ever that they are being listened to, are more valued, and can make their own decisions.

It is not enough to simply share these behaviours. To embed them and make them part of how you do things will need training and reinforcing through praise, holding people to account, and they will need to become a part of performance management and appraisals. In just 12 months, this has had a big impact and brought a return significantly greater than the investment we have had to make.

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“Staff feel more than ever that they are being listened to, are more valued, and can make their own decisions.”



I am sure you will be doing some of this already. The 10 behaviours that have made a big difference for us, and I would recommend, are:

- I always do what I say I will.
- I give more positive than negative feedback.
- I never talk about others behind their back.
- I am consistent and predictable in how I lead.
- I act calmly in difficult situations and ask for help if needed.
- I don't take suggestions as personal criticism.
- I do not impose my way as the only way.
- I am decisive when making decisions.
- I give team members the responsibility to do their job.
- I consider what is happening for staff outside work.

Strategy #6:

Implement wellbeing INSET days

- *John Rooney*

The context of the school and staff that I inherited in 2017 was quite stark. The budget situation was precarious. The school had been looking to make several redundancies. Staff absence had cost the school £100,000 in cover for the previous 12 months alone. That's to say nothing about the impact on other staff, particularly line managers who had to set work and, of course, the massive impact on pupil engagement and achievement.

The first thing I did was establishing a whole INSET day based around staff wellbeing. This was radical, especially at the first day back after the summer holidays when most staff expect the usual rundown of GCSE results, the nuts and bolts of the year ahead. It was led by a wellbeing professional and had to be supported by our approach throughout the year.

This September wellbeing INSET day set the tone for our transformation over the year ahead.

The impact of our wellbeing INSET day has been astonishing. There has been a massive decline in staff absence, which is now below national teacher absence rates. Our supply bill has been drastically reduced, pupils report greater continuity, and we have zero staff vacancies and very little staff turnover.

Strategy #7: Introduce a flexible approach

- *John Rooney*

As schools, we always complain if parents do not turn up for class assemblies, parents' meetings, and sports days. If we truly value parents and parenting, we must support this ourselves and allow our staff to be parents themselves.

One of the joys of our profession, as a parent, is having time in the holidays to spend with our own children. One of the disadvantages is not being able to take time to be a parent during term-time. It is within our power as school leaders to allow this to happen. We decided to officially recognise that staff should be able to have a day outside of our normal leave of absence policy, known as 'Academy Day'. It is a concrete way of supporting work-life balance and encouraging family-related activities that staff cannot normally attend such as Nativities, first day at school, or sports days. Not everybody has school-age children, so it can be flexible to ensure fairness.

This has definitely brought benefits back to the school – happier staff members who generally will give back much more to the school because of the time out they have been given.



Strategy #8:

Change the pattern of the school day

- *John Rooney*

One of the biggest positives we have implemented began last September when we started the year with a new school day.

For several reasons to do with transport and travel distance for members of the team, we decided to begin the teaching day at 8.00am. Breaktime is then at 10.05am, lunch is split and shorter than it previously was, and then we have just one lesson after lunch before our day subsequently finishes at 2.15pm.

This may seem radical, but the impact on staff wellbeing has been significant. With staggered working days suggested as a way to aid social distancing, we might be less radical than first thought! Staff spend less time commuting as they miss rush hour, and they are able to pick their children up from school. Some members of the team now have time to go to the gym too, when they wouldn't have previously.

We also 'stack up' meetings, especially when we are staying late for parents' evenings. Another result has been a significant increase in pupil engagement, including attendance at extra-curricular classes.

“Happier staff members generally will give back much more to the school because of the time out they have been given.”

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“Good mental health is contagious. It starts at the top and trickles down to every part of your school community.”

Strategy #9:

Provide practical guidelines regarding the use of email

- *John Rooney*

Email is an essential communication channel, but I've found that it can soon become a barrier - preventing staff from working efficiently and an unwanted intrusion into their home life. As a leadership team, we decided to set some clear guidelines around the use of email to help limit the volume of unnecessary messages sent.

These guidelines include staff only checking their email when they are not teaching during the school day. Outside of the school day, staff are free to check and read their email at any time, to suit their preferred working pattern, but no email should be sent between the hours of 7.00pm and 7.00am.

This curfew is applied to encourage a better work-life balance and to make us think more carefully about the emails we are sending. During the curfew, staff can draft emails and replies, but these should not be sent until 7.00am the following morning.

Only the PA to the Head Teacher has the ability to email all staff en masse. We have removed this function to cut down on the amount of unnecessary email that was coming into staff inboxes. I've also created a daily bulletin, *The McAuley School – The Day Today*, which captures all school life, news, and events. It's a must-read and significantly reduces the number of emails staff need to open.

Strategy #10:

View any changes through the lens of staff wellbeing

- *Mark Eager*

Before changing or implementing any new policies, procedures, and practices, we consider it through the lens of staff wellbeing by asking the question: *'what impact will this have on the wellbeing of colleagues?'*.

Nothing is now adopted without it passing our test of what is important. Is it:

- High effort for staff and low impact for pupils or staff?
Ditch these!
- Low effort for staff and low impact for pupils or staff?
Not a priority!
- Low effort for staff and high impact for pupils or staff?
Make these a priority!
- High effort for staff and high impact for pupils or staff?
Review which are worth it!

We also apply our in/out rule. If we are going to add something new then we need to remove something too. We use the same process to identify those things that have higher staff workload and lower pupil and school impact, and remove them.

Strategy #11:

Promote an inclusive social calendar

- *Paul Jackson*

Creating activities for staff to be 'real people' together has been key to our staff wellbeing. Understanding each other, talking to each other, and providing a support network for each other has led to a happier, more productive workforce.

A key here is remembering that not everyone enjoys (or can afford) going to the pub every Friday night. It is important to remember that some people do though! We aim for our 'social calendar' to be as inclusive as possible. A typical year of social activity for staff might look like:

- A year-round staff book club.
- A staff fantasy football league.
- A staff 'table tennis rockstar' league.
- A sharing breakfast in the staffroom on the last day of each half-term.
- A summer night in - usually a barbecue in the school grounds, along with a staff game of rounders in the playground.
- A Christmas night out.



There are, of course, regular Friday nights out. These are accompanied by impromptu events encouraged by school leadership, but organised by staff, and include board game nights, meals out, and bowling. One staff team arranged an evening at the local lawn bowls club recently!

The events are not always alcohol-related, but all create an opportunity for individuals to talk to each other, get to know each other, and generally care for each other.

COVID-19 has obviously put a stop to many of the calendar events planned, but we will pick these up again as soon as we can. Yet, we have adapted, making sure staff remained connected as we went into lockdown, both professionally and socially through such things as online quizzes, games, and socials.

Strategy #12:

Train colleagues in efficient approaches

- *Paul Jackson*

When it comes to staff CPD, all schools understandably spend lots of time looking at new methods to teach reading, behaviour management, dual coding, and curriculum development. However, we must remember to schedule in training time for basic skills, how to manage workload, and how to become more efficient. This helps to give teachers more of their time back to them, which has a significant impact on their home-life balance and their sense of wellbeing.

In our teacher training, we are not taught some basic things that will help us be more efficient in our jobs, such as how to:

Keep effective to-do lists, prioritise, delegate, use Excel and Word efficiently, touch-type, manage emails, manage diaries, and work effectively with video.

We've invested a high degree of importance in these things because we know that the more efficient our staff are, the more time they will have to invest in the things that matter - not just to the school but to themselves as human beings.

We have also dramatically reduced traditional displays at our school. We still absolutely celebrate and value pupils' work and have invested in picture frames and other more permanent solutions, where we are not constantly changing backing paper and borders.

We also use some carefully chosen titles such as "Working Wall" and "Maths Challenge", and have the titles made permanently from vinyl, which are stuck directly and securely onto the wall, rather than cutting out and laminating new titles every half term. This approach not only saves an incredible amount of teacher time, but it looks far better quality and is better for the environment.

We've also set clear guidelines about meetings to help all staff use their time wisely, including ensuring no meeting lasts longer than 60 minutes and all non-essential meetings should be cancelled when there is no need for a meeting and nothing specific is on the agenda.



Strategy #13:

Ensure all meetings are necessary and effective

- *Mark Eager*

We have all attended meetings where one or more of the following happens: they start late, finish late, cover too much, cover agenda items not relevant to me, have unprepared attendees, or do not achieve a satisfactory outcome!

Meetings were raised as an area where we could improve in our staff wellbeing survey. After discussion and review, we responded by agreeing those scheduling meetings would follow some basic rules and ask themselves:

- Is the meeting necessary?
- Could we communicate or distribute information or arrive at a decision in a better way?
- Does everyone who you expect to attend need to be there?
- Is there a clear agenda and outcome to be achieved from the meeting?
- Is the agenda realistic? Can it be covered effectively in the time available?
- Have I given attendees enough notice and information so they can contribute effectively?



Then following the meeting to ask themselves:

Did the meeting start and finish on time?

This can have a big impact on the degree to which staff feel valued. They are giving up time which they could use to manage their workload and may already have plans, including personal ones, particularly if it is an after school meeting. I encouraged everyone to finish when they said they would, even if the agenda was not fully covered.

Did we stick to the agenda and deliver the intended outcome?

I build 5 minutes at the end of my meetings to focus on the outcome and whether we have achieved it.

We started to look at this over 12 months ago, and it has made a significant difference and one that staff have commented on recently when we asked for further feedback on their wellbeing.

Strategy #14:

Set strict school opening hours for staff

- *Paul Jackson*

I've worked in schools that really are 'open all hours'. Setting limits on the opening of the school building forces even the most conscientious of teachers to spend more time at home. Teaching is a job where there is always something else to do, and if the school building is open until 8pm, there are some individuals who will 'happily' stay until that time.

I would always strongly promote schools locking their doors to staff no later than 6pm and certainly opening no earlier than 7am (obviously excluding encouraging community use of school facilities during the evenings). Some staff may choose to work in the evenings to stay on top of their work, and while we encourage and support them to minimise this, if they feel it's unavoidable then they should do it away from the school building.



What next?

Firstly, I hope you've found this report useful. Although we are currently facing the continuing challenge of COVID-19, and the uncertainty of what could happen next is likely to go on for some time still, we will come through it.

That is why we must remain focused on the long term, and I hope we will take lessons learnt over the last few months and come back stronger, more compassionate, and grateful for the things we do have.

If you share my determination to transform staff wellbeing in your school, then I'd be more than happy to discuss any of these proven strategies with you in more detail.

I've been working with school leadership teams to enhance staff wellbeing since 2009, and I'd be pleased to share my experience with you while listening to the specific challenges you face within your school.

However, more than anything, I wish you and your staff all the very best for the future. I'm full of admiration for the work you do. Look after yourselves.



Mark Solomons, Welbee



About the co-authors of this report

Paul Jackson...

is Headteacher of Manorfield Primary School, a large Primary School in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, one of the country's most deprived areas. When Paul took over the Headship, the school was rated Inadequate by Ofsted. At their next inspection, they achieved Outstanding in all categories – a phenomenal turnaround in such a short amount of time.

John Rooney...

has 20 years' experience and recently took over the Headship at The McAuley School, a secondary-aged Academy in Doncaster. The context of the school and staff that John inherited was quite stark; the school had been looking to make several redundancies, and staff absence alone had cost the school £100,000 in cover for the previous 12 months. John's focus on staff wellbeing has since helped to transform the school's fortunes.

Mark Eager...

is the Principal of Brixham College, a Secondary School on the coast of Devon. Like other coastal schools, many pupils are from disadvantaged backgrounds and lack the opportunities of being part of a larger community. Over the last 12 months, the school has seen a marked and measured change in wellbeing that has been recognised by its staff.

Mark and the whole team at Welbee would be delighted to hear from you, and would love to demonstrate how Welbee could help transform staff wellbeing at your school.

Simply visit our website to start today.



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