

Embedding staff mental health and wellbeing in your school's culture.

A positive approach to staff wellbeing is a fundamental component of good leadership. However, it shouldn't be reliant on the abilities, experience or passions of individual governors or members of a school's leadership team. Too often, schools attempt to address this issue without long-term sustainability in mind. A change in personnel can result in diminished attention going forward, as other priorities might seem more pressing.

It's therefore imperative that any school's approach to staff mental health and wellbeing is placed at the very heart of the agenda. It should become integral to the school's ethos and management culture. Governors should look to address the following to ensure this is the case:

Whole school approach

Wellbeing and mental health is an issue that affects all members of a school community, but only focusing on one group will undermine the efficacy of those efforts. Conversely a joined-up strategy that looks to build a positive approach for all pupils and all staff regardless of function, as well as parents and wider community members, will be self-reinforcing. One consistent approach and message, that addresses all constituent needs and challenges, will provide synergy. It'll also be more impactful and resilient. Mental health and wellbeing must be fundamental to the values and mission of the school.



Permanent agenda item

It's easy for wellbeing to become lost amidst the other challenges that schools and governors deal with. Making the school's mental health and wellbeing programme a permanent agenda item at board and staff meetings will help keep it front and centre - both as an issue in of itself, but also in how it relates to other decisions being made. It will also keep a conversation going which will reassure staff, pupils and parents that it's being taken seriously in of itself, improving their sense of wellbeing in the school.

Specific champions

All members of a school community, particularly governors and SLT, have the responsibility to take mental health and wellbeing seriously. They should consider wellbeing implications when it comes to their decision-making. However, having specific governors, staff members, and even parents who have specific roles regarding mental health and wellbeing will support it remaining on the agenda and part of the culture. Be it delivering training, running surveys or raising awareness, schools should identify individuals to champion wellbeing within the school. These people can use their passion and expertise to monitor and improve the school's approach.

Regular measuring

However a school chooses to measure the efficacy of their approach to mental health and wellbeing, it should be done regularly and consistently. One-off or irregular efforts look tokenistic and are unhelpful in measuring trends. Regular surveys provide useful statistical data and feedback that can be used to inform policy decisions, while demonstrating commitment to the issue. Ideally the findings and resultant decisions should be shared transparently.

Management responsibility

Staff wellbeing is not a 'nice to have' or afterthought for those in management positions. Instead, it should form part of any appraisals and reviews. All those with line management responsibility should receive appropriate training and be expected to monitor and manage the wellbeing for their reports. New staff should be made aware of the school's wellbeing policies and provisions, as well as what expectations are in this regard for them and their managers. Conduct exit interviews to determine if wellbeing and mental health policy concerns should be raised.

A well-known business axiom states that 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. Governors need to be aware of how this affects their intentions for wellbeing in their school - the power, both positive and negative, of culture. If boards and school leadership lack buy-in and fail to address all the constituent components of how a school actually runs, then all the high-level policy changes in the world will not equate to meaningful change. Equally, a sustained programme that is transparent, financially and labour sustainable, well-resourced, well-planned, and based on the specified needs of the school can deliver an almost self-perpetuating engine of positive wellbeing embedded within the school.

CPD, training & resources

Devoting real resource to this issue is a clear demonstration of commitment. It will ensure the school is supported in the long-term with subject-matter experts that are fully embedded within the school. Having organic sources of knowledge who are supported by external capabilities, as well as a staff conversant in best practice, provides both breadth and depth in the wellbeing culture of the school. Expectations are elevated and the school's culture is much less vulnerable to changes in staffing or priority of the board and SLT.

