

1

CULTURES AND SYSTEMS FOR WHOLE SCHOOL WELLBEING

Frederika Roberts

What?

In order to truly achieve ‘whole school’ wellbeing, systems and a culture need to be in place that facilitate this. In this chapter, we’ll explore the positive impacts on the entire school community when a whole school approach is taken, and the consequences when it goes wrong, before looking at practical examples of how schools are getting it right. Finally, I invite you to consider how you can play a crucial role in achieving a culture of wellbeing in your school.

Why?

Calls abound from around the world for a culture of wellbeing to underpin everything that happens in schools, and to support this with school policies, systems and processes. In her 2018 report, Payne refers to a wide range of benefits to students and staff in ‘schools with a positive and communal climate’ (Payne, 2018: 1). She cites a positive impact on attendance, engagement and academic achievement and children’s socio-emotional health, in addition to a reduction in aggression, substance abuse, school suspensions and expulsions, and criminality. For staff, Payne refers to benefits such as higher job satisfaction and morale, and reduced staff absenteeism. Public Health England (2014) and White (2016) also stress the importance of the school’s policies and overall environment, and of instilling a culture of wellbeing in order to best support children’s wellbeing and readiness to learn.

4 THE BIG BOOK OF WHOLE SCHOOL WELLBEING

A recent impact study carried out at Oxford University (Lindorff, 2020) found evidence, based on research carried out across the globe, of a relationship between wellbeing and academic attainment, with the strongest evidence supporting that a whole school approach to wellbeing can improve academic outcomes:

There is also strong evidence to suggest that whole-school approaches to promoting wellbeing can have positive effects on a wide range of other student outcomes, including mental health, self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, behaviour, and decreased probability of dropout.

(Lindorff, 2020: iii)

For the reasons outlined above, whole school approaches form the basis of most of my work with schools and my academic research. At the core of this lies the understanding that a whole school approach cannot solely focus on children's wellbeing. Much of the training I run in schools centres on providing staff with strategies and a toolkit for their own wellbeing. When writing *For Flourishing's Sake* (Roberts, 2020), I interviewed educators from a wide range of schools worldwide; many stated the crucial role of staff wellbeing:

Although students are absolutely central and the reason we do what we do, to put them first, you have to have staff in the best possible condition.

Patrick Ottley-O'Connor

In order for my children to flourish, my staff need to flourish.

Dan Morrow

(Roberts, 2020: 33-34)

Cultures and systems for wellbeing need to be driven, or at least supported, by the school's leadership; 65% of respondents to an online survey I circulated in December 2020 stated the school's or Trust's leadership as being ultimately responsible for setting the policy and tone and for facilitating whole school wellbeing.

Simply having a wellbeing policy, or stating that there is a culture of wellbeing, is not enough. In the same online survey, nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents stated they worked, or had previously worked, in a school that simply paid 'lip service' to wellbeing, or had a 'tick list' approach to it.

Examples included

- Being made uncomfortable asking for time off to attend urgent hospital appointments.
- Being told to 'get over' family illness and bereavement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- In a school where policies and meeting minutes indicated a culture of wellbeing, the headteacher obstructed wellbeing surveys and refused governor requests to hold staff exit interviews.
- A pupil-only focus on wellbeing.
- In one school, staff were not allowed to attend their own children's performances in teaching time. This was demoralising, upsetting and had a huge impact on goodwill.
- Staff were also expected to run school events on evenings, weekends and holidays, which impacted on staff goodwill and affected family relationships.
- Another school had a 'pupil voice' suggestion box, but suggestions were never read nor acted upon, leading to resentment, cynicism and disaffection for any other future programmes or ideas.

According to survey respondents, the consequences of such a superficial approach to wellbeing include

- Exhausted, resentful, demoralised staff who feel undervalued
- High levels of staff sickness (physical and mental health reasons)
- Reduction in the quality of teaching
- Reduction in student engagement
- High staff turnover and loss of experienced staff (it's worth noting that nearly two thirds of respondents stated they *currently* work in a school that has a culture and systems for whole school wellbeing, suggesting that unhappy staff will 'vote with their feet' and move to schools that 'walk the walk' rather than just 'talk the talk').

Whilst the above examples demonstrate the crucial importance of the school's leadership genuinely supporting wellbeing, school leaders cannot do it alone; 60% of respondents to my online survey stated that everyone in school has a role to play.

How?

In my 'LeAF (Learn and Flourish) model of whole school Positive Education' (Roberts, 2019, 2020: 22–23), I highlight 14 elements required to achieve a whole school approach to 'Positive Education', which I describe as equal weight being given to academic outcomes and to student and staff wellbeing and mental health.

Whilst I cannot cover all elements in one chapter, their headings – which range from ‘Leadership’ to ‘Physical Environment’ via ‘Ethos and Policies’ and ‘Wellbeing Curriculum’ – give some indication of the breadth and depth required of a whole school approach. The overarching themes are reflected in the conversations I have with teachers and school leaders as part of my work as a school wellbeing trainer and consultant, and in the responses I received to the survey I circulated online in December 2020.

The speed of responses I received, on a Christmas holiday evening in the middle of a global pandemic, indicates the importance of whole school wellbeing as a topic of discussion and professional focus around the globe. To give the responses more context: Just over half (55%) of respondents were teachers, one third were in senior leadership or headship roles, 5% held wellbeing roles, and the remaining respondents were split equally between governors, non-teaching staff and union representation. The majority of respondents (70%) were in England, 13% in the United Arab Emirates, 5% in Scotland, with the remaining respondents split equally between China, New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, Wales and Switzerland.

Key takeaways were that clear policies and systems are required to make wellbeing a genuine focus within school, that consistency is important, and that whilst some of the little extras such as free lunches, massages and other staff wellbeing initiatives can be great, these cannot be applied as the only interventions and need to be tailored to staff needs. It is also important to note that ‘staff’ does not mean only teaching staff; in Chapter 21, Kimberley Evans helps you explore how to consider the needs of non-teaching staff as part of a whole school approach to wellbeing.

Pupil wellbeing was mentioned the least in responses to my survey, though there were great examples such as ‘young wellbeing ambassadors’, one-to-one pupil coaching and a bespoke wellbeing toolkit for certain year groups.

Perhaps the main focus of responses was on staff wellbeing because, as one respondent indicated, many initiatives for children’s wellbeing exist in schools, whereas staff wellbeing still requires much work. This is reflected in the findings of the 2020 Teacher Wellbeing Index (Education Support, 2020): Pressures on education professionals’ wellbeing and mental health have led to over half (52% of all education professionals, 59% of senior leaders) considering a change of profession, with high workload being cited as the main reason by over three quarters (76%) of senior leaders and over two thirds (68%) of education professionals overall.

Policies

Most of the responses mentioned the importance of having policies with a staff wellbeing focus, particularly around marking, emails, and time for ‘planning, preparation and assessment’ (PPA).

Marking policies

Rachel Poulton, a member of the senior leadership team in a school in the United Arab Emirates, said her school has a digital feedback policy allowing for verbal, rather than written, marking. Senior leaders and teachers from schools in England also referred to marking policies designed with teacher workload in mind.

When I interviewed Flora Barton (now Cooper) for *For Flourishing's Sake*, she described how, when she began her headship at Crowmarsh Gifford Primary School in Oxfordshire, England, she set out to ensure all staff could 'leave at least twice a week at 4.15pm with nothing in their hands' (Roberts, 2020: 37).

Five years after she introduced this policy, one of Flora's teachers had embedded verbal feedback in lessons so successfully that he had done no marking at home for nearly three years.

Emails and other communications

A number of schools have introduced email and out of hours communications policies. One school in London, England, for example, has a policy of 'no emails before 8am or after 4pm on workdays'. Rebecca K, a senior leader, told me that her school has a staff email protocol which sets out 'reasonable expectations for email responses'. Another teacher referred to an 'email curfew', a term also used by Jo Owens, Director of Ethical Leadership at Lichfield Cathedral School:

Because of the school's organic growth, the school has a quirky structure spread out across several buildings [...]. This [...] resulted in staff sending and receiving many internal emails. The school's leadership team therefore made a decision to set an e-mail curfew between 7pm and 7am, legitimizing staff not to respond to e-mails immediately. This has made a big difference in giving staff permission to go home and stop working in the evenings. Key to the effectiveness of this policy has been the effort by members of the senior leadership team not to email staff during the curfew hours. If people do send an e-mail after curfew, it's either a mistake or an emergency, so this is rare.

(Roberts, 2020: 37-38)

PPA time

Although it is a legal requirement for most teachers in England and Wales (National Education Union, 2019) to be given PPA time of at least 10% of teaching time, the amount and structuring of PPA time seem to differ greatly between schools. This featured significantly in my survey responses, with respondents valuing schools that allow teachers to take occasional PPA time at home, for example.

Time off and breaks

Policies allowing staff to take time off during school hours to attend their own children's school events, guaranteed lunch breaks and staff wellbeing days were other examples of policies aimed at supporting staff wellbeing.

Training

Jessica Austin-Burdett, Head of Art, Design and Technology in a school in England, values that her school's CPD is 'subject needs-based', while Heidi Groesche, a teacher at an international school in the United Arab Emirates, likes that her school provides training that goes beyond teachers' 'technical development'.

A number of schools invest in external providers to support staff wellbeing. Miss G, a senior leader in an English school, told me her school has wellbeing staff briefings and has hired an external wellbeing provider to support staff. Dr Victoria Carr, Head-teacher at Woodlands Primary School, also in England, told me:

... we buy into the concept of resilience training by buying in a range of trainers to support resilience in staff.

Mentoring and coaching

This was mentioned by a number of respondents to my survey. One teacher told me their school has a trained mental health mentor for children and staff, others talked about regular 'check-ins' with staff, and another told me that their school has invested in coaching and a wellbeing award.

Peer support

A number of teachers told me their schools have trained mental health first aiders, while one respondent mentioned trained mental health 'ambassadors'. One school has a system where staff 'buddy-up' with a colleague in a different department so they can openly share any concerns and support each other.

Behaviour

Behaviour is a topic close to my heart, as the stress this caused ultimately drove me out of the teaching profession. According to the Teacher Wellbeing Index, in October 2020, 84% of education professionals (89% of senior leaders) described themselves as stressed (Education Support, 2020).

A number of respondents to my online survey who described their schools as taking a whole school approach to wellbeing mentioned that this included behaviour policies specifically designed with staff wellbeing in mind.

What can you, as an individual, do?

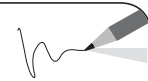
As stated earlier, the responsibility for creating a culture of and systems for whole school wellbeing, while needing to be driven and supported by the school's leadership, rests with everyone; that means you.

First of all, you need to take responsibility for your own wellbeing, managing your mental and physical health in all the ways you have control over; from nutrition, to sleep, to self-care practices, there is much you can do to look after your own wellbeing. This is covered in more detail in *Self-care for busy educators – a practical guide* (Chapter 6). If you want to explore the area of self-care even further, I recommend *Teacher Wellbeing & Self-Care* (Bethune and Kell, 2021).

Additionally, consider the following (the list is by no means exhaustive)

- Be kind (to others and to yourself).
- If your school has policies to support your wellbeing, follow them (e.g. don't respond to parent emails late at night – unless it is an emergency).
- Consider volunteering for peer support roles.
- Seek help if you're struggling.

Over to you



We have merely scratched the surface of a huge topic in this chapter. Hopefully, however, the examples above have given you food for thought. Now take some time to make notes on how you can personally contribute to a culture of whole school wellbeing in your school.

- What is your school already doing well?
- How could it improve?
- What steps will you take to make this possible?
- Whose support can you enlist?

References

- Bethune, A. and Kell, E. (2021) *Teacher Wellbeing & Self-Care*. London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Education Support (2020) Teacher Wellbeing Index 2020. Available online at: www.educationsupport.org.uk/sites/default/files/teacher_wellbeing_index_2020.pdf (Accessed 1 March 2021).
- Lindorff, A. (2020) The impact of promoting student wellbeing on student academic and non-academic outcomes: An analysis of the evidence. Available online at: <https://oxfordimpact.oup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Wellbeing-Impact-Study-Report.pdf> (Accessed 3 March 2021).
- National Education Union (2019) Workload and working time. Available online at: <https://neu.org.uk/advice/workload-and-working-time> (Accessed 30 December 2020).
- Payne, A.A. (2018) Creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate: Contemporary research, present obstacles, and future directions. Washington, DC. Available online at: www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250209.pdf (Accessed 31 March 2021).
- Public Health England (2014) The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment. Available online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370686/HT_briefing_layoutvFINALvii.pdf (Accessed 30 March 2021).
- Roberts, F. (2019) 'LeAF: The Learn and Flourish Model and Self-Evaluation Framework for Whole School Positive Education.' Unpublished manuscript, Anglia Ruskin University.
- Roberts, F. (2020) *For Flourishing's Sake: Using Positive Education to Support Character Development and Well-Being*. London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- White, M.A. (2016) 'Why won't it Stick? Positive Psychology and Positive Education.' *Psychology of Well-Being* 6(2).