

Boost pastoral outcomes by investing in your staff

Drawing on the excellent work of Cardiff High School and The Marlborough School, **Daniel Sobel** discusses how ensuring the wellbeing of your students begins with prioritising the wellbeing of your staff

I must declare that I am not poster boy for anything to do with mental health. In fact I proudly and openly share my personal challenges at the beginning of my talks and any meetings I have about my ADHD, eating problems and a cadre of other issues.

Having seen hundreds and probably thousands of schools, I have got only a handful of examples of what I think is stunning wellbeing in practice – and in this article I would like to share with you the work of two schools in particular.

This article is not suggesting individuals should not ever do x, y or z initiative, but I instead will ask what whole organisations (schools) could do in order to create a culture of wellbeing. There are two schools I am drawing on for this article as they each emphasise a different aspect of wellbeing that I have learnt from – Cardiff High School and The Marlborough School in St Albans. This is my interpretation of their work – so please do not hold them to account for any inaccuracies.

Staff wellbeing

Results can be influenced by the wellbeing of students, which starts with the wellbeing of staff. Cardiff High School is known for being a very high-performing mixed ability school. There is a long list of things that Cardiff High does for its staff and to create a culture of wellbeing, all led by their innovative deputy head Allison Yarrow, whose portfolio is wellbeing!

In fact, the list is so long it would surpass the word count of this article but they include providing the following for staff on a daily, weekly or monthly basis: ironing, yoga, meditation, car washing, dinners, dry cleaning, and so on. But that is not the most impressive bit. For me, there are two additional factors that knit all of these together.

First, the senior leadership team has two standing items on the weekly agenda which they talk about before any other business:

- How can we reduce the staff burden?
- How are our staff doing (personally)?

Second, in the words of Ms Yarrow: “When we interview for new staff – which is increasingly rare because we have a lot of teachers wanting to work here – we do what we refer to as a ‘whites of the eyes’ interview.”

She went on to explain that this means something approximating “finding out about their emotional intelligence”. They believe that they can



IMAGE ADOBE STOCK

train any new member of staff to become an outstanding teacher and they do not need them to be up to this level when they start. That is the doable bit – if they are willing and open. But for their training and all their focus on wellbeing to work, they need staff who are psychologically and emotionally intelligent and who “get” our attitude towards children.

It is the priority and consistency of care by the leadership and managers across the school which underpins a pervading atmosphere which leads directly to remarkably high performing results.

Of course, I hear you screaming: what about the cost!? Indeed, the colleague headteacher who accompanied me when I visited the school said that she could never do any of this in her school because of prohibitive costs.

So we did a quick calculation. Cardiff High School has a minimal staff turnover and absenteeism is next to nothing so cover costs are negligible. The incredible high performance of staff leads to a collaborative and internal sharing of

CPD and this in turn saves time and money. Student absenteeism is negligible and so interventions are at a minimum, along with the additional staff that would be required. The savings in time and money are everywhere and we calculated that an average school of similar size was spending £100,000-plus on “dead” items (like cover), whereas Cardiff High is spending significantly less and gaining all the benefits of their staff investment.

This is not an overnight change – this has taken years to evolve and it is still a current, daily discussion. But the principles are clear to me and this is the bit that I want you to consider most clearly beyond all the rhetoric about wellbeing:

- 1 Take care of your staff and they will deliver amazing results for you.
- 2 Investing in your staff will save you money and time in the long run.
- 3 You cannot have a happy, high-performing student body without a happy high-performing staff.

- 4 Everyone benefits from having a wonderfully warm and encouraging atmosphere.
- 5 Hard data results in this school put others to shame and they attribute the wellbeing aspect as core to this high achievement.

What your staff know informs what they do

The Marlborough School has a higher than average SEN and Pupil Premium cohort and yet it has the most incredible culture of inclusion. I tried to put my finger on what it was that shone through and so I asked a whole bunch of students about their staff and what it meant to be a teacher there.

In response, students used the following words: available, listening, extra mile, caring, know me well, and so on. Of course, many teachers all across the country are these things, but it was the consolidation into a pervasive, consistent culture that made this unusual.

Headteacher Annie Thompson would be the first to be open and honest and not talk about being perfect. She exudes a depth of care and this is what the whole school is about. As she says: "It's pupils first, not grades first."

There are many aspects I would like to praise about this school, but I will highlight just one for this article: students' sense of "belonging and wellbeing" is linked directly to the attitude and skillset of the staff.

While at the school, I carried out an interesting exercise to ascertain a baseline of how knowledgeable the classroom teachers are about

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social emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues, since it is teachers who have to face them every day, often without any serious training.

The staff in this school scored higher than any mainstream I know – and I carry out this exercise a lot. They have prioritised getting SEMH know-how into classes and that is why their mixed cohort – which would be challenging in other schools – thrives. The students feel deeply connected to the “home of a school” and it is that safety that translates into that holy grail of inclusion: belonging.

The very high level of knowledge and skill of the classroom teachers include things like:

- What common behaviours look like and how to respond to them effectively.
- Common cognitive distortions and how to respond to them.
- De-escalation strategies.
- Understanding how to include students with: slow processing speed, auditory processing, vestibular and proprioceptive challenges.

- Recognising, responding to and pre-empting anxiety.

It is this in-depth and high skill knowledge that created the framework for all discussions, interactions and relationships. This has come from a high level investment in the staff and a priority of psychological knowledge above and beyond all else to underpin the organisational structure and inform all learning.

Conclusion

There will be readers who will fairly question whether we have the time or money to put into these luxuries. I would argue – that if you are going to ask your staff to teach children with a range of SEMH needs then make sure they are prepared.

And if you are asking the world of your staff (and let's face it, which school doesn't?) then for heaven's sake, reward them accordingly.

Wellbeing is not a luxury, it is a necessity and is not as far away from performance and data outcomes as some like to think.

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Daniel Sobel is founder of Inclusion Expert which provides SEND, Pupil Premium and looked-after children reviews, training and support. You can find all his articles for SecEd on our website via <http://bit.ly/2jwoKP8>

Further information & resources

- ▶ Alston & Sobel: *The Inclusive Classroom: A new approach to differentiation*, Bloomsbury, January 2021: <https://bit.ly/3kBduiQ>

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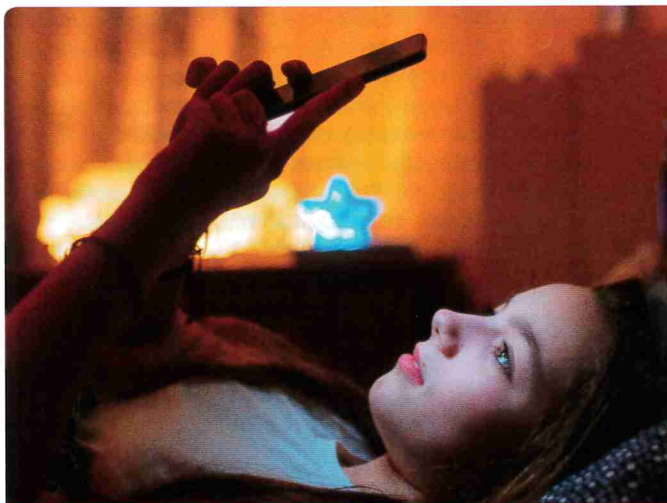
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