WE Position Paper III:
Personnel: well-being, support and retention

Report created with Whole Education trust leaders participating in Leading a Whole Education in Trusts series

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How have Trust Leaders responded to ensure their staff feel supported during the pandemic?

Trust leaders recognised that the staff in their trusts have shown high levels of resilience and professionalism in responding to the changing demands of educational provision throughout the pandemic. Whilst there are many examples of micro-actions undertaken to support staff with their well-being, the following common themes emerged from the conversation:

1. **An established compassionate and ethical culture/ethos** has been essential as a foundation for authentic and meaningful support;
2. **The practicalities of ‘crisis’ leadership** - timely and clear communication, flexibility and the need to recognise the individual and the challenges that they face;
3. **The importance of professional learning** as a method of sharing practice in relation to Covid-19 strategies;
4. **Maintaining a focus on and a connection to purpose**, recognising that it is through this that we can nourish and create a sense of well-being amongst all staff.

“What is our role, as trust leaders, during this time? It’s partly protecting and supporting our schools from all the external pressures - so they can concentrate on supporting all their young people.”

In detail:

(1) Trust leaders recognise that providing the right support to each individual staff members throughout the pandemic has in itself been a complex and challenging undertaking; each person’s experience of the pandemic has been deeply personal. Supporting staff in an authentic and meaningful way is as much cultural as it is practical. A pre-existing ethical culture has created behaviours and a framework that have naturally come to the fore at a time of crisis and challenge.

(2) A common theme throughout the pandemic has been the need to make significant changes to the provision with very little notice. This is clearly challenging for leaders however it is important at these times to do the simple things well: good communication that is clear and timely; taking the time to think not only about what could be done but also what should be done; ask - “What do our staff need now?” and be cognisant of the needs of the many whilst flexible to adapt to the needs of the few. Key to ‘keeping things simple’ is focusing on values, mission and moral purpose as the acid test of decision making in uncertain times.

(3) Creating a “spirit of sharing and mutual learning” in which staff can collaborate to find new modes and methods. It has been important to develop and provide staff with tools and practical strategies. As important has been the provision of relevant suites of courses for staff to access to develop their own practice further.

(4) In all trusts, ‘purpose’ has been at the core of the strategy for leadership decision making and for supporting staff. The operational response to Covid-19 could easily disconnect staff from the purpose of working in schools, i.e. children and children’s learning. Taking the time to refocus staff on learning and the development of learning is innately nourishing and therefore has a positive impact on well-being.
How Whole Education trust leaders are leading the way for personnel well-being, support and retention

Trust leaders were clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a specific test of the trust wide relationships with and between staff. However, there is a longer term focus to create ethical organisations: values-led and where there is a rich culture of support and development for all staff.

The culture of the trust (and the schools within it) is central to the creation of an ethical organisation:

1. **There is compelling evidence that a healthy culture improves staff efficacy.** Everyone within the trust should therefore perceive the culture as a key component of the trust/school improvement agenda.

2. **Define the culture and live by it.** The culture should be co-created and clearly defined in behaviours and actions, for all stakeholders in the community. Left undefined, each individual will define it for themselves.

3. **Inform everyone about the culture and be open to challenge.** Each person’s experience is unique and their relationship with the culture should reflect this. Nobody should choose between being a good teacher and being a good mum, dad, partner, son, daughter or friend. The culture should support personnel relationships in and outside of the trust.

4. **You don’t need a wellbeing programme.** Wellbeing is the result of everything we do, say, how we behave and the systems we choose. Individual well-being activities should be offered in addition to this, not as a replacement for it.

The culture should be:

1. Built upon professional trust
2. Focused on the vision, values, mission and underpinned by moral purpose
3. Supported by a rich and nourishing developmental entitlement for all staff

“When you don’t know what to do, go to your values, mission and moral purpose”
Looking to the future: Systemic cultural change - immediate priorities, our role and system expectations

Trust leaders reflected on the responsibility they have for ethical leadership within their own trusts, however they were also acutely aware of the pressures that exist at a system level. To ensure that all leaders and all organisations can lead ethically we must collectively challenge these pressures. Identifying the drivers for unethical behaviour at a national level:

1. **Performativity.** The performance of young people and therefore the organisation is publically shared through performance tables. This has created a system divided by competition and comparison at a local and national level. To lead ethically is to create a system built upon collaboration and celebration where the performance of all young people and their schools is perceived as a collective endeavour and responsibility.

2. **High-stakes accountability.** All of the trust leaders are clear on the importance and relevance of accountability within the education system. However, they were equally clear that the current system of perceived ‘winners and losers’ creates a high-stakes culture for individuals and organisations. We all have some responsibility for the current system and therefore we must all act to challenge and change it.

3. **Challenging toxic behaviours.** ‘The standard you walk past is the standard you are prepared to accept’. All leaders should act ethically to challenge ‘toxic’ behaviours whenever and wherever they are seen at an individual, organisational, local and national level.

Background:

**Whole Education** is a national network of schools and trusts collaborating to providing a high-quality whole education for all their young people.

**Leading a Whole Education in Trusts** supports leaders across trusts to share and learn from each others practice and explore what leading a whole education across a group of schools looks like.

Leaders in the LAWET group support and inspire each other to take a sustainable, long-term approach to leadership that challenges the short-termism we see in the English education system.

**The WE Trust Influence Forums** are roundtable events that provide trust leaders with the space and time to collectively influence each other and the system and become a powerful, positive voice for the change they want to see in education.

Further info:

*Are you curious to find out more?*

If have any thoughts or comments, we would love to hear from you.

Get in touch [trust@wholeeducation.org](mailto:trust@wholeeducation.org)