

Thoughts from the network: Supporting the wellbeing of all staff

This week, our members offer their views on how they have been caring for their teams during the pandemic to enable them to support the mental health of the young people in their care.

Welcome to the latest in our regular series of articles where we share the thoughts of SSAT members on national developments happening in education at the moment.

We know that the experiences of the last year have had a profound effect on the mental health of our young people, and you can hear from SSAT Senior Education Lead, Sylvia King, as she [reflects on this year's Children's Mental Health Week](#).

However, we also wanted to consider the toll that the pandemic has taken on those working in schools – the need to completely change how teaching takes place, the stress of ever-changing (and last minute) guidance, and the potential feelings of isolation that can come from home working. That's without mentioning managing their own families and periods of illness and isolation.

We know that schools in the network have been working really hard to support their teams through this difficult time, and the following are all ideas shared by schools in the network. Thank you very much to everyone who has taken the time to share their practice; it is much appreciated.

If you are a headteacher or senior leader in an SSAT member school and would like to get actively involved and share your views on future policy developments, get in touch with Alex Galvin, Senior Education Lead, [via your school's Relationship Manager](#).

Supporting new members of staff

Essentially the same general approach as in previous years – we usually have a comprehensive induction programme in the early part of the term. We recruited about ten new staff for September, seven of whom were recruited over Zoom. We put additional time into staff induction, allowing them to visit the school in the summer and to take part in an online induction day in July. There was more contact between new staff and their subject leaders than would normally have taken place.

At the start of the autumn term, we kept to the usual induction programme but made sure subject leaders had structured and focused conversations with new staff to ensure they were supported and felt 'looked after'.

We had anticipated that our NQTs would have a knowledge and experience gap. This is true for some, but others are really strong.

We normally have NQT mentors who sit outside the NQT's department, a system which works really well for us. This year we have really tried to improve even further the communication between mentor, subject leader and NQT in a sort of 'triad' structure.

We have also spent more time on informal drop-ins to lessons, including the NQT Induction Coordinator.

Thinking about staff in their second year, whose NQT year itself was impacted by the school closure, we have adopted elements of the Early Careers Framework eg by giving those staff regular meetings with a mentor through their second year.

We have continued with our staff induction programme virtually. During term one we used socially distanced meetings and offered the same level of support we usually do. During lockdown our support has moved to virtual meetings. NQTs and new staff still get all of the support they used to, just virtually. So that is a regular meeting with a subject mentor, a regular meeting with the professional mentor and then access to induction sessions each half term.

NQTs benefit from the support offered to the whole staff but also have fortnightly PD sessions with the ITT lead, and have a school buddy/mentor. New staff are also given a buddy and participate in an induction programme (standard fare really eg sessions on CP, teaching and learning etc.)

New staff and NQTs have regular weekly meetings with our teacher, i/c teacher training and an in-school mentor. Other than that, they participate in the wider support provided for all staff.

Same programme as previous years, only remotely. We still do observations and pop-ins into virtual lessons. It's a weekly programme of mentoring/support cross curricular and a subject specific mentoring meeting.

We have linked new members of staff with another member of the team – not related to line management. We hope that has given them another person to talk to if they come up against problems and someone else checking in on them – just in a friendly capacity.

We supported new members of staff as normal before Christmas and now over Teams.

Supporting the morale of the team

In terms of our hardest time, one of our site supervisor staff died from Covid earlier in the term. I am so grateful we have a bereavement policy and protocol and a school counsellor and chaplaincy team. They were the hardest miles I have walked as a headteacher, but we helped each other through it and came out the other side, I think the biggest word for me is "family", we try to be a work family for one another.

In the first lockdown we had a virtual tea break every week and a staff quiz. Hoping to resurrect these this time soon.

We introduced the 'Board of Brilliance'. This is an opportunity for staff to nominate colleagues who have achieved something non-work related or made a contribution that goes above and beyond their role in school. The staff fund has also been reviewed, ensuring that contributions are made annually, enabling us to send flowers and cards to staff on appropriate occasions, as well as some 'quick fix' initiatives; we have introduced treats for staff in the form of cakes and chocolates on Fridays, CPD days and end of term drinks and nibbles.

During the first lockdown we also initiated a 'thought for the day' email which was all about wellbeing and nothing about T&L!

Since September we have set up a voluntary 'wellbeing group' who meet regularly and share ideas. This has led to one person a week being given the role of 'cheerful person' and sending amusing emails to staff. We have also set up two online group sessions with a local instructor to encourage staff to engage with learning ways to enhance their own MH and wellbeing; the second of these was

organised this half term and to run during the school day so as to encourage staff to attend (parents all knew in advance that lessons would not be live for one hour that day).

Focus on physical safety in school – social distancing, early adoption of face coverings etc.
Occasional 'treat boxes' in staff work areas

Staff 'shout outs' each week – nominate staff who are doing a great job – to share widely.

Cook Off! competition for staff, students and governors.

A volunteer sends wellbeing / positive / amusing messages to staff each week and the staff have organised a weekly 'pub quiz' amongst themselves.

We also have online staff wellbeing training booked for an afternoon just before half term (external speaker) – parents have been told there will be no live lessons at that time.

Staff wellbeing group meets half-terminally to discuss and plan initiatives and concerns being raised, chaired by a senior teacher who has responsibility for mental health and wellbeing.

'Here to help' app for staff (and a different one for students).

Staff virtual socials including a dinner event where we all cooked the same dinner at the same time and a wine tasting evening.

When we were in school, we arranged distanced socials for departments.

Random acts of kindness eg dropping off chocolate bars during virtual parents' evenings.

Staff quizzes on Zoom.

Gave everyone a copy of Boy/Mole/Fox Horse at the end of summer term.

Gift at the end of last term.

We carried on with our acts of kindness week (COVID secure this year) where staff have an AOK angel and they send messages of support and little gifts. We had to quarantine these this year!

Keeping people connected

We have written a coaching policy to set out our aims and provide a framework. Our coaching is fully supported by our SLT, some of whom are coaches themselves, and others who regularly access coaching to support their own practice. It is an integral part of our school ethos, and we have a team of 15 teaching and non-teaching members of staff who are trained coaches that anyone in our school community can self-refer to for some one-to-one sessions. We also train both internal and external colleagues from other schools to become coaches.

I have insisted staff come in each week this time for a check-in with their forms, but also so that we can catch up with one another and check staff are ok. It has been a challenge for some of our younger, single staff who live alone. We really keep an eye on them and try to keep in touch. I am going to start sending out little thank you cards in the next few days as a personal touch as well.

Effective line management to ensure everyone is 'OK'.

For wellbeing we have always been a closely knit staff community. Returning from COVID meant that we had to convert our staff room into a classroom. We made mini staff rooms around school. All with free tea and coffee and biscuits (something we have always done). We worked quickly to re-establish a central staff workroom by making an extra classroom provision.

Weekly whole-staff briefings on Zoom from the very beginning of Lockdown#1.

Live briefing each week and staff bulletin every Friday.

We have raised awareness of our employee assistance programme and asked middle and senior leaders to get in touch with all of their teams regularly.

Managing workload

We work flexibly wherever possible to honour requests for part time working, family days/events and work together as a team to support colleagues if they are unwell, both physically and mentally. Moving all lessons to live lessons, full delivery of our usual timetable remotely, has increased 'screen time'. As a result, we have reduced lesson time by 10 minutes so that we have a movement break between lessons, even at home! Currently we are working on T&L strategies to reduce screen time for all.

I think the most important thing here is that leaders have to be genuine when they say they care about their team. Ensuring that decisions match the rhetoric eg take a member of staff off lessons for a few days and set cover if they are struggling, make sure you praise staff when you write to parents, let them set cover in the afternoons before virtual parents' evenings so they have off screen time; build in breaks to the school day between lessons so everyone can get up, stretch, have a drink and get away from the screen.

As a result of the work of our wellbeing R&D group, several new systems and initiatives have been implemented. Regarding systems, we reviewed the ways in which new staff members are welcomed to the school, including how and when information is shared with them. On a practical note, for teaching staff, a central space was created on the t-drive where staff could share the layout of teaching rooms ready to create seating plans. We looked closely at the report writing process and this was changed to a system of stars and targets, using statement banks. Another example of reviewing an existing system was to look at how school detentions were run. Following our work, this is now a centralised process, where supervision is shared, avoiding too many members of staff operating separate detentions.

Prioritising consideration of staff wellbeing in discussions – first item in SLT meetings (second is student wellbeing). Looking at all changes through a wellbeing lens, thinking about implications for workload.

A cautious approach to remote education during Lockdown#1, believing this was a marathon not a sprint and we had to implement an approach that was sustainable. Lots of staff and student feedback which fed into development.

Comprehensive practitioner-led programme of CPD to support remote learning provision.

Significant investment in technology across the school during the summer to support implementation of bubbles and base rooms in September – essentially ensuring that peripatetic teaching staff encountered exactly the same technology whichever room they were in. For example, replaced all old IWBs in about 35 rooms with smartscreens to match those in newer buildings.

In lockdown#3, remote learning following school timetable but with clear expectations around live lessons (eg maximum amount of 'on-screen' time) and the encouragement and support to avoid 'digitally didactic' approach.

Staff working at home where appropriate – eg support staff who were not 'student facing' largely WFH, and provided with laptops or PCs with remote access to school servers.

Funding basic items like laptop risers, mice and keyboards for teaching staff working from home during Lockdowns#1 and #3.

Engaged additional IT technical capacity to support staff in delivering remote learning.

In an attempt to support staff, over the autumn term we permitted one late start/one early finish per week where colleagues were free. We moved AM registration to follow period 2 for KS3 and after morning break for KS4 (we had separate break and lunch times for KS3 and KS4). Staff had to notify line managers who kept a record, and this was held centrally by the cover manager. Unfortunately, once staff absence rates crept up due to COVID/SI etc, we had to pause it at the end of November. We also reduced the number of after school meetings. We are signed up to the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and we also operate a flexi-day system where colleagues can take one morning/afternoon off per year (total of three if have been teaching with us for three+ years).

Principled approach to remote learning strategy – not all lessons are live.

2 x Consolidation Days this half term – staff have time to plan online lessons.

Regular and effective staff training for remote learning/Teams.

Encouraging work/life balance

We work flexibly wherever possible to honour requests for part-time working, family days/events and work together as a team to support colleagues if they are unwell, both physically or mentally.

Photo competition – 'virtual fresh air' photos of walks/exercising etc.

Each year we have four 'Wellbeing Weeks' without any evening meetings and the most successful recent initiative was our ironing days (where staff ironing was completed by a local ironing service).

Sensitive and reasonable approach to vulnerable staff and tricky family issues – BE NICE TO PEOPLE!

Adopted a set of principles based on our core values that guide all decisions during this period – widely and regularly shared with staff.

The pandemic is placing great pressure on all staff as they juggle their commitments at home and to their work. Regular check-ins from SLT and middle leaders for those working at home mean that any issues can be ironed out and our wellbeing staff team are always on hand if staff need to offload about difficulties in home or with their work.

Wellbeing champions across all levels of the staff who can be approached by anyone to raise a concern, chat, offload, etc.

Constant reinforcement from SLT about 'being good to yourself', etc.

Live mindfulness sessions every Wednesday at 7.30 on Teams.

We have a wellbeing practitioner who has daily sessions and then there are the variety of enrichment activities such as staff book club etc.

During lockdown we have tried to be as accommodating to personal circumstances as possible and this has helped many staff.

Checking how everyone is

SLT weekly meetings with subject leaders, again with a primary focus on wellbeing.

Building in time at start of the autumn term for staff re-engagement with each other and the school as well as 'training'.

Earlier in the academic year (November) we ran a staff workload and wellbeing survey – this gave us a baseline and will give us a regular (annual?) review point.

We have a weekly voluntary staff wellbeing group / meeting (30 minutes at the end of school – currently done over Teams). Feedback from this group is shared with all staff and feeds into SLT meetings / planning.

Promoting positive mental health across the school

Annual Area Development Plan for Wellbeing/Mental Health 2018, 2019-2020

Here our aim was to embed a positive policy and procedures relating to Behaviour for Learning and Anti-Bullying. Raising the aspirations and outcomes for all students including those who are disadvantaged. Ensuring positive mental health and wellbeing for all pupils' and students and promoting the inseparable link between teaching, learning and behaviour.

Mental health policy – we created this policy to support the wellbeing work that is ongoing, and to provide a frame of reference for everyone in our school community. From the initial policy statement setting out our goals, through to detailed appendices offering information on local and national support networks, this remains a live and relevant document that both governors and parents/carers in particular, have fed back as to its usefulness.

Research groups – ten research coordinators have been appointed who are leading research teams within the school to focus on researching and developing strategies for addressing different aspects of mental health and wellbeing in relation to the whole community (students, teachers, support staff, parents/carers)

Mental health award – last year we were awarded the Gold Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools. This involved evidencing a wide spectrum of eight different strands ranging from 'Leadership and Strategy' through to 'Working with External Services'. It was a fantastic vehicle in enabling us to recognise both our strengths and weaknesses and formulate how best to build on the work we had already begun. It ties in very closely with our mental health and wellbeing policy as they are both 'live' documents that we reference constantly to maintain and grow our vision.

Over the past three years we have also partnered with Mental Wellbeing in Schools, a 'not-for-profit' enterprise, where we have introduced a new understanding of the mind that we call in school 'Inside-Out' coaching. This is not a therapy but works from the understanding that our thoughts create our

experience of the world that we live in. Integrating this into our coaching and school ethos has enabled us to successfully address early stress and anxiety so that we have hugely reduced the number of referrals to external agencies and work successfully with parents/carers and our wider school community on improving levels of wellbeing. The value of this intervention has now been picked up by our local NHS commissioning group and is being relayed into the wider community.

Additional resources

Thank you to [Newport Girls' High School](#) and [Shenley Brook End School](#) for sharing additional wellbeing resources for download:

- [Wellness Action Plan – Employees](#)
- [Wellness Action Plan – Line Managers](#)
- [Wellness Template Action Plan](#)
- [Wellbeing Charter](#)

Your opportunity to get involved

If you are a headteacher or senior leader in an SSAT member school and would like to get actively involved and share your views on future policy developments, get in touch with Alex Galvin, Senior Education Lead, [via your school's Relationship Manager](#).