School Improvement Episode 15: Staff wellbeing teams

AUDIO

Rebecca Vukovic (/authors/rebecca-vukovic) 14 June 2018

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Hello, thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine. I’m Rebecca Vukovic.

My guest today is Dani Lang, Headteacher at Brimsdown Primary School in London. When Dani first started at the school just over three years ago, it was going through a troubling time. There had been two ‘requires improvement’ Ofsted inspections, and it was judged to be in the lowest 10 per cent for Year 6 reading progress. In response, the school established a staff wellbeing team, setting clear intentions to prioritise staff happiness. Establishing the staff wellbeing team has been one of the factors in helping the school achieve a vast improvement in its Ofsted grade, and it has created a new harmony in the staffroom. Dani joins me today on the line from the UK to chat more about it. But, to kick things off she tells me more about her school’s context.

Dani Lang: We’re a three-form entry primary school in north London, in Enfield. So it’s from three- to 11-year-olds. In addition to that we have a deaf and hearing impairments space, so we have a number of deaf children and staff within the school. And we’re in a very high deprivation area as well. But the school has gone from strength to strength over the last three years, going from ‘requires improvement’ to a ‘good’ school now by our Ofsted standards, with three areas actually being ‘outstanding’ as well.

Rebecca Vukovic: And Dani I know you’ve said before that staff are the most important resource in your school and their wellbeing is key to making things
happen. Was this your motivation behind starting the staff wellbeing team that I know you have in your school?

DL: Yes it was. The staff are really important – within any school – and here at Brimsdown, that is the main thing that I’ve spent my school budget on, making sure we have got really well trained staff and staff that are well supported so that actually they can do the best for the children here. And that has the biggest impact actually on the children and their learning and that’s what ensured the good progress, the outstanding progress that we’ve had here. It was the main motivation and I think especially when I started at the school, just over three years ago, the school was in a very difficult place because it was in ‘requires improvement’.

It hadn’t made the progress that it actually needed to make and that was really kind of upsetting for the staff because they were all working and trying hard, but it wasn’t having the impact that it needed and it was quite disheartening for the staff as well. That’s why it was important to actually look at their wellbeing, make sure they were in a good place, support them and train them the best we could so then actually, they could have that impact on the children and their learning.

RV: And so how did you go about actually establishing the wellbeing team, what steps did you take?

DL: So initially, I just kind of spoke about the idea in a staff briefing to see who might be interested. I explained that it was going to mean a small bit of extra work for them (but obviously we’d do whatever we could during the school day), but that it was about actually [thinking] about how we could improve the staff in getting their ideas and their views, because I didn’t have all of the answers. They’re the people working in the classrooms, working over lunchtime, doing the different roles around school and I wanted to make sure that everybody had a view there.

After that … I think there was 10 people that were interested in that idea and the role. So I met with those 10 people and we started to have half-termly meetings and I’d chair the meeting and I’d put items on the agenda but it was around: What is happening? What is working well in the school? What do you think is creating more workload for you? What is creating more stress? We designed a survey which we then sent out to all of the staff. We have just under 100 staff here and 60 of the staff responded to that survey and we then used that both in the leadership team meetings, but in the wellbeing team meetings as well to look at where things were coming up as an issue, how we could actually improve that and what people might need – unpick that a little bit further. If somebody was saying, displays were causing them a lot of stress, well what was it about displays? How could we then support and
reduce that stress and workload around that area? Marking came up – we have a fast feedback policy which is actually a no written marking [now] by the teachers, the children self-mark.

There was quite a lot of things. It was also about actually, we think of ourselves as a family here at the school, so it was thinking how can we do more things together as a family but also understanding that everybody might have a different perspective. We might want to do a quiz night and there might be 30 people turn up, that’s fine because that’s what they’re interested in. So, making sure that all of the different staff in school, there was something that they might opt into if they wanted to.

**RV:** And Dani, how have you been tracking the effectiveness or the impact of this initiative on staff wellbeing?

**DL:** I mean a lot of it is more through conversations with staff and those kind of lighter conversations. We still do a couple of times a year we do what I call ‘the traffic lights’. And within a staff meeting we’ll look at what things are going well generally across the school if there are things that need improving, if there are things we want to put in the bin because it doesn’t work and it doesn’t have impact, and that is not just about the children and the initiatives in school but obviously that impacts on how staff are feeling and wellbeing around things.

We also have done another survey, so the survey that we did in the very beginning, we replicated in January this year, 18 months later to see what impact was had. There was a very positive impact in the fact that people were saying that their stress levels were reduced. They were definitely saying that workload – because of the new feedback policy – had reduced and they were not having to spend holidays or weekends or evenings marking things. And also they were saying that the admin side of things had reduced because we had looked at ways of putting stickers in books rather than cutting things up, we were encouraging that the children do things, and we got somebody within the office to do some of the admin and photocopying side of things each week as well. So, it has been multiple ways really, but lots of those conversations with staff I think.

**RV:** Besides the wellbeing team, are there any other wellbeing initiatives that you’re running at the school?

**DL:** We change them every time. Now we meet once a term, sometimes more if we need to. But I ask them [the staff] and we look at different things. We had mindfulness training in January of this year and we did that in two ways: we did mindfulness for staff and things they could do around mindfulness for themselves
and how to reduce stress; but, then we also looked at mindfulness and how we could implement that in the classroom as well. So lots of the staff have been doing that mindfulness. We introduced at the start of this year an afterschool club for staff, one on yoga and each week we'll go into the hall and people that want to will go and do yoga, and one around circuit training and again people dip into that. It's something they can access for free here afterschool at 4.00 pm and people can dip in and out of attending those.

We've had different organisations of staff dos and nights out where we have had quiz nights. We continue to have a housekeeper. We use one of our inset days, which is actually tomorrow, as what I call a 'wellbeing day' – so it's not staff training or anything, people don't have to come into work, they just need to think about themselves and have a nice day to themselves. So that continues but we've looked at how we might implement further next year to make the term days a little bit better as well.

**RV: Wow, There's definitely a whole range of fantastic things going on!**

**DL:** Yeah, but I think that's what's important. It's been important to make sure that there's lots of different things. Because we've got a staff that are Muslim and don't drink, might be on Ramadan, we've got staff that that's the social aspect that they do want, we've got staff that have got children and want to do something after school, we've got staff on a variety of different pay grades so we need to have things that are free, things that aren't going to cost. So it's important actually to kind of make sure that there is that variety so that people will access the different types of things that they want to access.

**RV: Dani, as a school leader why is it important to be available to listen to staff concerns regarding wellbeing?**

I think that if you don't listen then it becomes a bigger issue and things can start to spiral and eat away at people. So, actually listening and then dealing with something there and then is much more beneficial before, then people start to speak to other people and it grows and then that person starts to feel that they're getting upset and they're getting overwhelmed with things. So, for me, the quicker something is shared, the better that we can deal and share. It's that whole problem shared, problem halved.

**RV: Fantastic! And in your own experience Dani, what have you learned throughout this whole process?**
DL: I think that idea about being available and also that idea of the impact of me on staff. Obviously I want to improve, and in the beginning I was part of the problem because I kind of putting all these initiatives out there which were the right things to do in some ways for the school and to move things on as a school and improve the school and get it to be a good school and improve those outcomes for the children. But, actually, all of those new things, it was a lot for staff to take on board.

So I think it is about being continually reflective. Whenever I introduce anything new, I go and speak to the wellbeing team about it, as much as I speak to my leadership team about it, because they’ll give the different perspectives on that new thing that’s going to be coming in. So I think that’s what’s been important – I don’t have all the answers … other people will have other views and ideas and perspectives and will see pitfalls that I won’t see. So actually it’s good to get those different views.

RV: And just finally Dani, for schools listening who are thinking they may want to do something similar in their own school setting, do you have any advice for them when it comes to establishing their own staff wellbeing teams?

DL: I think the biggest advice is about getting a team that are going to, one are going to be happy and supportive to put in that extra little bit – especially in the beginning, it has been them putting in that little bit extra. And I would do little things like get them extra little boxes of chocolate and things like that to show the appreciation side of it, but in the beginning they were having to stay for some extra meetings and things. So you’ve got to think about their wellbeing as well.

And also, getting a variety of staff. I’ve got teaching assistants, trainee teachers, we have our communications support workers that work with the deaf children, I’ve got inclusion teaching assistants that work one-to-one. It’s been important to actually get that real kind of breadth of the different roles of staff, because everyone will have that different perspective of their team and how it might affect the people that do a similar role to them.

And the other thing is, have fun with it. We’ve done lots of nice and fun activities, as well as kind of balancing that out with thinking about workload and stress management and so forth. I think it is about having both things – the workload aspect, but the fun.

That’s all for this episode – to keep listening or to download all of our podcasts for free, whether it’s from our series on Behaviour Management, Global Education, School Improvement, Teaching Methods, Action Research or The Research Files, just visit acer.ac/teacheritunes (http://acer.ac/teacheritunes) or soundcloud.com/teacher-
As a school leader, in what ways do you ensure that you are available to listen to staff concerns regarding wellbeing? How is this communicated to staff?

As an educator, if you were asked how you believe staff wellbeing could be improved in your school, how would you respond? Is this something that could be shared with your school leadership team? Why/why not?