For Schools & Trusts

Improving staff wellbeing

A guide for governing boards in schools and trusts

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Guidance

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Introduction

Governing boards – as employers or with employment responsibilities conferred upon them – have a legal duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of employees in their schools and trusts. Protecting staff wellbeing can reduce staff absence, improve outcomes and is:

- essential for improving morale and productivity
- critical to recruiting and retaining good staff
- taken account of as part of Ofsted inspections

This guide is intended to help boards and leaders create a healthy workplace culture and recognise staff as a core component of a whole school/trust wellbeing strategy.

The Department for Education (DfE) Workload Reduction Toolkit includes materials to help governing boards and can be used alongside this guide.

Education staff wellbeing charter

The education staff wellbeing charter is a declaration of support for, and a set of commitments to, the wellbeing and mental health of everyone working in education. The charter was co-created by members of the education sector including unions, the DfE and Ofsted.

All state-funded schools are invited to sign up to the charter as a shared commitment to protect, promote and enhance the wellbeing of their staff.

As a signatory, NGA encourages boards to follow our lead, sign up to the charter and hold themselves accountable for delivering its commitments.

1. The wellbeing of school and trust leaders

Leading a school or trust is one of the most rewarding, yet challenging, roles in public service. CEOs and headteachers have numerous responsibilities and high levels of accountability. This puts them at greater risk of stress, anxiety and burnout, which can mean they leave the profession early.

The governing board has a duty of care towards their school or trust leader. Our wellbeing evaluation tool is designed to help boards and school/trust leaders have meaningful conversations about wellbeing, self-care and how this is modelled throughout the school/trust.

Education support is an organisation that provides wellbeing services and resources for school staff, including a free wellbeing support service for school leaders. The service includes sessions with qualified and experienced supervisors to focus on mental wellbeing and help develop new coping strategies.

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2. Monitoring staff wellbeing

Reports provided by school/trust leaders should help governing boards to monitor staff wellbeing. This is likely to include the following sources of information:

Staff absence and turnover data

This data can help to identify trends, patterns and concerns across the workforce. The reasons behind any trends should be discussed and understood – the number of absences or staff leaving a school/trust may be a result of a number of factors; not all are related to the working environment or job satisfaction.

Staff surveys

It is good practice for schools and trusts to carry out routine (usually annual) surveys to help monitor staff wellbeing. Carrying out surveys is an operational task; however, anonymised feedback and trends should be reported to the governing board (or delegated committee) to inform policies and decisions that impact positively on:

- the working environment and culture
- the quality of working relationships
- workload pressures
- support received from colleagues and management
- issues that may adversely affect staff performance

Feedback from exit interviews

It is also good practice for schools and trusts to conduct exit interviews with members of staff who leave so that they can provide feedback about their experiences of the workplace and reasons for leaving.

Exit interviews are carried out on the same principle as staff surveys; the reported feedback should be used by the board to inform policies and decisions that improve the working environment and culture.

3. Engaging with staff

Engaging with staff enables boards to gain a better picture of the issues that impact wellbeing in their school or trust. Governing boards can engage with staff through:

- **A member of staff with oversight of wellbeing issues** attending relevant board meetings and or discussing progress with a governor/trustee responsible for monitoring wellbeing.
- **Joint staff and governing board planning meetings** to consider strategic objectives, the likely impact of proposed changes and creating the right conditions for implementation.

Our guidance on how governing boards can engage with staff describes a range of other mechanisms boards can use.

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4. Strategies to improve staff wellbeing

The following strategies are known to improve the working environment and the wellbeing of staff in schools and trusts. Boards should consider how they can be implemented in their own context:

Reducing governing board demands on staff

All governing boards will want to ensure that board meetings do not add excessively to the school day. Boards should strive to achieve a balance between gaining the information and access required to govern well and reducing the workload burden on staff. We encourage governing boards and school leaders to consider the following action:

- **Review the content and format of reports** provided to the board – can they be presented differently to include required information, while reducing time spent producing them?
- **Schedule and manage** governance visits to school(s) in order to avoid busy periods and potential disruption to staff carrying out their core duties.
- **Work with the board's governance professional** to identify reporting milestones and policy review dates. Scheduling meetings accordingly reduces ad hoc requests for information.

Adopting policies that improve wellbeing

Policies that aim to make schools more family-friendly workplaces are proven to increase both staff retention and productivity. This includes policies that encourage and promote flexible working and accommodate job sharing and part-time working.

Governing boards also have an important role in ensuring that policies are consistent with the aim of improving wellbeing and work-life balance. For example:

- the school/trust email protocol (within a communication or IT policy) should discourage staff from checking emails outside of working hours and from sending unnecessary emails
- the marking/feedback policy should meet pupils' needs without creating unnecessary work

Starting conversations about flexible working

Excessive workload and poor work-life balance are among the main reasons for teachers leaving the profession. It is recognised that a culture shift is needed to embed flexible working in schools so that they are seen as exemplary employers.

At governing board level, conversations about flexible working ordinarily happen only when the board is deciding on individual staff members' requests and appeals. Our guide to flexible working supports boards to proactively develop effective flexible working policies that contribute to whole school/trust wellbeing.

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Streamlining data collection

Management and oversight of data collection is the responsibility of school leaders. However, the governing board should ensure that these activities are proportionate in terms of the burden placed on school staff. It is reasonable for the governing board to ask:

- How is data collection managed?
- What is being done to minimise the information that teachers are required to compile?

For example, does the school have no more than two or three attainment data collection points a year, which are used to inform clear actions?

Reducing workload pressures

Not every measure will work at every school; it is useful to gain a staff perspective on what is being proposed. Measures aimed at reducing workload could involve:

- changing the school's approach towards timetabling and curriculum planning
- creating opportunities for staff to work collaboratively to plan learning
- changing the school day to improve pupils' learning and how teachers prepare for lessons

Investing in wellbeing and the working environment

Allocating resources to improve the working environment is a tangible way for governing boards to demonstrate their commitment to staff wellbeing. Investment in staff training to boost wellbeing (such as mindfulness and resilience), support services (such as stress counselling) and improvements to equipment and facilities can yield positive outcomes.

The budget for continuing professional development (CPD) is an important ongoing investment in staff welfare and wellbeing. CPD that helps staff to develop professional competencies and capacity can be a powerful tool for retention, but also for recruitment and succession.

Organisations that support wellbeing

- Well Schools – events, podcasts and reports on creating healthy, happy schools.
- Schools Advisory Service – webinars, mental health service, resources and more to support whole school wellbeing
- Education Support – staff wellbeing audit and other tools
- Mentally Healthy Schools – quality-assured resources, information & advice
- Resources collated by the DfE to support and monitor staff wellbeing

Workload and wellbeing e-learning

Subscribers to NGA Learning Link can access an e-learning module exploring the governing board's role in managing staff workload and wellbeing.

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NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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