



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY  
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



# MENTAL HEALTH INSIGHTS WORKING PAPER

July 2024



## EDITORIAL

The Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools, established in 2017, has evolved into a thriving community dedicated to mental health and wellbeing. Today, we proudly encompass over 1,400 members.

Our mission is to build a supportive and empowering network for school professionals who are passionate about enhancing mental health and wellbeing across their entire school communities.

For this Summer 2024 edition, we have invited the community to submit case studies, think pieces and research documents focused on highlighting staff wellbeing.

In the bustling environment of education, where the focus is often on the students' welfare and academic progress, the wellbeing of the staff can sometimes be overlooked. However, the importance of prioritising staff wellbeing in schools cannot be overstated. Teachers and other school staff members play a pivotal role in shaping young minds and fostering positive learning environments. Ensuring their wellbeing is essential for their own sake and the educational institution's overall health and success.

Where the demands on educators are high and the profession's pressures can be overwhelming, addressing staff wellbeing has become increasingly imperative.

According to the TES school wellbeing Report 2024:1 UK, nearly three out of four respondents – a significant 74% – considered leaving the profession entirely within the past year.

These figures are alarming and highlight a critical issue with staff retention, emphasising the urgent need for action to improve the working conditions and wellbeing of educators.

Staff wellbeing is crucial for teacher retention. High stress and burnout lead to turnover, disrupting school stability. Prioritising wellbeing enhances satisfaction, morale, and job retention, benefiting both staff and students.

Additionally, educator wellbeing directly affects educational quality. Supported teachers are more engaged, improving student outcomes. Schools with high staff well-being see better academic performance and a positive climate. Investing in staff wellbeing promotes both personal growth and teaching effectiveness.

But what does "Investing in Staff Wellbeing" look like?

I am thrilled to present some truly insightful contributions and case studies that delve into these concepts.

**Andrew Cowley**, a highly respected author and wellbeing practitioner known for his candid approach, delves into the pressing issue of teacher mental health in his compelling research piece, *Crisis? What Crisis?* He reveals the alarming state of teacher well-being and its significant effects on retention and recruitment within the profession.

**Laura Anthony**, a regular contributor to the *Mental Health Insights Journal* and a proactive Mental Health Lead, shares her innovative use of the DfE Education Staff Wellbeing Charter. She describes how it serves as a valuable framework for addressing the well-being of her entire staff.

**Mike Tumber**, a dedicated Mental Health Lead at an inner-city secondary school, recounts the success of a Staff-Only Wellbeing Week, filled with engaging activities. Impressively, over 70% of the staff participated enthusiastically, without any obligation to sacrifice their personal time.

**Tom Spindler**, Director of Faculty, discusses his sixth form college's achievement of the Bronze FE Mental Health Award. He highlights a series of effective initiatives that have sparked meaningful conversations among colleagues, successfully breaking down silos across different areas of the college.

**Dr. Susan Woodshore**, leading the Mental Health Ambassador program at an independent school, has been creatively using comic formats to initiate discussions about wellbeing. At a recent Staff Wellbeing Conference, she shared the significant impact her charming comic strips have had, making relatable scenarios that resonate with many.

**Emma Coller**, director, and co-founder of Growth Pod, offers a thought-provoking piece on adopting a Systems Science Approach to support wellbeing at every level. She emphasizes integrating positive psychology principles to foster a holistic wellbeing culture.

For future editions, we plan to explore various themes and continue presenting case studies that highlight best practices. Each edition will include case studies alongside Think Pieces and research exploring innovative ways to transform culture and reframe our approaches to supporting the mental well-being of students, staff, and parents.

Guest Editor

Clare Erasmus

Designated Mental Health Lead Advisor, educator, and author of *The Mental Health and Wellbeing Handbook for Schools: Transforming Mental Health Support on a Budget* and *The Designated Mental Health Lead Planner: A Guide and Checklist for the School Year*, both published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

# Research Piece

## Crisis? What Crisis?

### Poor Teacher Mental Health and Wellbeing on Retention and Recruitment in the Teaching Profession

By Andrew Cowley

Crisis. It is an emotive term. A dramatic one too.

One definition of crisis is that it is a time of intense difficulty or danger, which may relate to times of international tension or economic hardship. Another relates to a point in time where a difficult decision must be made and yet another to a turning point in the course of a disease, either to recovery or to terminal decline. Crisis also refers to a state of feeling, an internal experience of confusion and anxiety to the degree that formerly successful coping mechanisms fail, ineffective decisions are made, leaving the person in crisis vulnerable, afraid, guilty, helpless, and hopeless.

Amongst all the talk of a crisis within teacher retention and recruitment all the above definitions, especially the last one, would appear to have some relevance and application. A May 2024 report in The Independent (1) and the annual Teacher Wellbeing Index from the Education Support Partnership (2) highlight some core issues that school leaders and governors need to consider in their strategy, in their school culture, in the relationships between colleagues. Among some of the stark statistics from both the first of these references are these:

40,000 teachers resigned from state schools in 2021-2022. That is 9% of the teaching workforce.

78% of teachers report feeling stressed.

A NASUWT workforce survey revealed 23% of respondents drinking more alcohol, 12% using or increasing their use of antidepressants, and 3% reporting self-harming.

A Facebook group Life After Teaching-Exit the Classroom and Thrive has some 159,000 members, growing by the week, full of despairing posts.

If we look in more detail at the statistics from the Teacher Wellbeing Index, we can see that our school staff are not always happy, and that staff mental health should be a priority in any school. We have 78% of staff feeling stressed but this figure being 89% for senior leaders.

Other more detailed statistics include:

55% of staff feel their organisation's culture has a negative impact upon their wellbeing.

46% of all staff say that their organisation does not support staff with mental health and wellbeing problems particularly well.

81% of staff experienced mental health symptoms because of their work.

39% of staff had a mental health issue in the year up to the point of the survey.

45% of staff thought the symptoms experienced were a sign of anxiety and 28% thought them a sign of depression.

35% of staff thought symptoms were a sign of burnout.

26% of staff feel isolated and lacking companionship at school.

As a result of its findings, NASUWT members backed a suicide prevention strategy at its annual conference. While there has rightly been attention to the well-being of headteachers during and after the Ofsted process, particularly after the death of Ruth Perry, equal consideration should also be given to the well-being of teachers—not just during inspections, but throughout the entire school year.

Crisis? I will not labour the word much more but consider the impact of losing 9% of our dentists in a year, or 9% of our refuse disposal workers. Either would soon see a public outcry, louder than we have seen regarding the situation in our schools. Let us turn our thoughts to how we got here and some thoughts about what we can do about it.

Why?

One reason we have reached this situation is because in the last 35 years or so, the profession has never asked 'why' we do what we do. Since the introduction of a National Curriculum, of Ofsted, of testing in primary schools nobody asked why, it just happened and there was an unspoken expectation that teachers and schools would take on more. If we had asked why, if we had thought about our wellbeing from the early 1990s onwards instead of from the 2010s, then perhaps retention and by implication recruitment might not have been the issue it is today.

We didn't ask 'why' so we unwittingly allowed things to happen which led to our workload increasing. This began with National Curriculum levels. Colleagues in Year 2 knew that their class had to reach level 2, then some bright spark pointed out that a whole class couldn't all be at the exact point in learning, so we had grades 2A for the most able, 2B for those on track and 2C for those below average. These children who were previously 'on track' were now behind. For some reason we then accepted that these sub-levels were then applied to levels 1, 3, 4 and 5 as well. We then accepted average point scores, which meant half a level of progress a year. How do you halve a sub-level? By splitting them in half so we had sub-sub-levels. We accepted this as the norm, leaders expected this as the norm and we created more work such as individualised targets, tracking sheets and whole class targets. Workload increased, and there was little realisation that these additional tasks, which had little if any impact on the children, were slowly eroding wellbeing and adding to teacher stress.

The 1997 election with the "Education, education, education!" soundbite which could translate to "Workload, more workload and even more workload," not through government policy but because we had advisers and leaders telling us what we had to do, especially around the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. Every new initiative, though packed with resources, seemed to add to what teachers were expected to do.

At no point did anyone explain WHY... much of what was presented was non-statutory, so why do it? We continued to add to this load, with 2010 representing a further turning point.

Children responding to marking.

Teacher responding to children's responses.

Green and pink highlighting of work.

Learning objectives, in the correct font of course, glued into place.

There was never a why, never a shred of evidence and never a realisation of the load it added to teachers.

If there was a why, it was about results. Children were either assessed inaccurately or taught to the test just to meet targets. This led to students progressing to secondary school at levels their new teachers found difficult to reconcile with their actual abilities.

Too often, the reason has become "Because I said so!" as leaders adopt the infamous 'non-negotiables' which hang like the Sword of Damocles in a profession that should be full of care, understanding and empathy. The only non-negotiable should be that there are no non-negotiables, but that is for discussion at another time. The culture of non-negotiables and simply accepting more workload had led to a further issue.

### **Cognitive overload**

There is, in truth, no getting away from workload because teachers must plan, prepare, assess, and give feedback, which has always been the case and always will be so.

Excessive workload, such as requiring planning in a certain format emailed to senior leaders at a weekend for approval only to be emailed back for amendments and improvements to be made, often on a Sunday evening, is an example of excessive workload becoming cognitive overload. Another example is holding key events, such as parent evenings, in the last week of an already busy term when staff will be emotionally and physically exhausted already.

Cognitive overload might be a result of our failure to ask why and to simply plough through our expectations without consideration of the outcomes but can also be used by less scrupulous leaders by simply giving so much to be done that a mistake or an omission inevitably occurs. This might result from excessive marking expectations, with one book left unmarked, or from perceived omissions in planning, such as lesson timings. Whilst mistakes may be made, if they are minor and aren't impacting on a child's learning or safety, a gentle reminder should suffice, but so many of our staff are working in environments that they fear the consequences of non-compliance.

Cognitive overload can also lead to stress and for teachers and support staff who have worked successfully for years suddenly doubting themselves, having their self-confidence undermined. It eats into the time taken on other work-related matters and crucially into personal and private time, which should be absolutely protected in a positive wellbeing culture.

### **Unnecessary tasks**

Unnecessary workload was supposedly going to be eradicated after three reports from the DfE in 2016, aimed at reducing workload in planning and preparation, feedback and marking and on data management. Some of these have been put in place, but where these have been reversed, workload is on the rise again. One example is the expectation that all plans and lesson slides use a generic logo, either of the school or of a multi-academy trust. Another is the aforementioned insistence on planning being emailed to senior leaders on a Saturday with adjustments required for the next day. Petty examples, which build into the growing picture of stress include having to work in a certain font and font size as well as a colour on documents and spreadsheets, or the angle at which staples are used on corridor displays.

### **Myths**

There are several myths about being a mentally healthy school which offers a programme of support for staff and pupils alike.

Compassion is soft and fluffy. No, it is not. It is possible to be respected and trusted as a leader and as a teacher through being kind, showing you care. Respect earned by fear is not respect.

If we give to others, there is nothing left for us. Showing compassion does not mean neglecting our own needs. We can set up boundaries, protect our own wellbeing whilst also supporting others. Wellbeing and mental health are for everyone and is subject to both equality and equity.

Compassion and having high expectations are mutually exclusive. Again, this is wrong. Compassion leads to effort, loyalty and going the extra mile without being asked. A lack of compassion might deliver begrudging and inauthentic loyalty.

Performing and caring are mutually exclusive. Rigour and procedures help colleagues know where they stand. This is different from non-negotiables and aligns with a model of consistent practice. Teachers will perform because they care.

Exposing my vulnerabilities will expose me. Talking about vulnerabilities in an empathetic workplace culture can build trust, show humanity and be inspirational.

## **Being unheard**

Are teachers heard? Schools celebrate student voice, parent voice, but what about the staff? Is the 'open-door' policy as open as it seems, or does the door metaphorically and literally close when staff raise issues? If staff leave that office visibly upset, then their voices regarding their mental health are not being heard. Staff surveys, if they are carried out as paper exercises become meaningless if the findings are not acted upon or at the very least listened to with feedback on what could be done. The posts in *Life After Teaching-Exit the Classroom* and *Thrive* are full of tales of being unheard. Interestingly, an increasing number of posts are now anonymised, as there are suggestions that some senior leaders have joined the group to catch out colleagues for what they are discussing about their workplace, which makes being heard even by those in similar circumstances a challenge. Such actions make a mockery of schools that promote a positive culture of wellbeing on their websites.

What can be done?

Readers who have encountered my words before will know that I am no fan of tick box wellbeing activities, reactive actions, sticking plaster approaches or of staffroom cake. Authentic strategies, aimed at an equitable and principled approach, are much more impactful.

### **Recognise effort**

Many staff move on to different schools simply because they feel that they are overlooked and undervalued in their current capacity. It is important to recognise when a teacher has gone above and beyond, and to take the time to express your appreciation. Praise should always be objective, and it should not make other staff or departments feel that there is no room for their own improvement. By building a culture of recognised success you will create an environment that rewards both loyalty and effort.

### **Reward dedication**

A traditional way of securing staff retention is to offer a reward for hard work and dedication. This cannot for budgetary reasons be a pay boost, but simple and cost-effective rewards can be concrete and build loyalty. Wellbeing days, where a day can be taken at an agreed point in the year, are one example. Another example is the opportunity to attend key events such as Nativity plays and Graduations—moments that cannot be recaptured if missed. Rewards tailored to the needs and profile of your staff show that you know them and appreciate them.

### **Investing in employees' careers**

Lack of progression is another common reason teachers decide to move on. Fulfilling career potential is a key issue – in fact, two out five teachers say they would turn down a job that offered no training or development. By introducing regular continuing professional development, this proactive approach will have the combined positive effect of strengthening teachers' commitment to the school and honing their ability to offer highly successful teaching for their students.

## **Showing support and presence**

Simply being there as a leader is essential. Do not remain in your office, appearing only for learning walks and to be critical. Teachers cannot be expected to remain committed and motivated in their role if you do not support them. You need to be present in their working lives. Dedicated time to support your staff can be so much more impactful than showering staff members with rewards. Be there to talk to, not to be feared.

## **Nurturing relationships and culture**

Schools thrive on the positive culture that is promoted within and on the relationships that grow from it. Poor relationships can lead to isolation and to bullying in the workplace. Therefore, it is critical that you promote a positive school culture within each staff member's working life. Get this right and you can seriously boost loyalty and teacher retention.

## References

The mental health crisis crushing teachers – and what it means for schools

<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/teaching-mental-health-schools-quit-b2540733.html>

Education Support Partnership Teacher Wellbeing Index

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>

Andrew Cowley is a former primary school Deputy Headteacher and now a coach, speaker and writer on staff and pupil mental health and wellbeing. His books *The Wellbeing Toolkit* and *The Wellbeing Curriculum* are both published by Bloomsbury Education.

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# Case Study

## Using the Education Staff Wellbeing Charter

by Laura Anthony

I have written before about how our return to school post-covid was directed by a non-negotiable need to re-build a sense of belonging in our school community, particularly amongst some of our students and their families. By encouraging their leadership skills and belief in themselves, and then putting in place strategies to nurture our student voice, our students are now the powerhouse that is building and encouraging greater resilience and wellbeing amongst their peers in school. At the same time running regular forums and opportunities for our parents/carers to engage in shared conversations with staff continues to build their sense of belonging as an important part of our school community.

Our staff well-being focus was always the missing link when we considered well-being from a whole school perspective. Some wellbeing input had been happening in the background but needed revitalising. By giving some thought to ensuring a safe space, we hoped that this would encourage our collective staff voice to shine through. Accordingly, we set up two steering groups; a general all staff one that everyone could access, via email or meetings, and an SLT steering group to respond to our whole staff feedback. At the same time, we felt that it would be useful to come to this with some form of scaffolding to help direct and support the journey and hit upon the DfE 'The Education Staff Wellbeing Charter.'

We signed up to this in 2022 and immediately felt aligned to its core message, and its statement that 'We want to see a sector that is free from mental health discrimination, guided by emotional intelligence, and characterized by supportive, nurturing cultures. A sector where the conditions are such that every member of staff can thrive.' Being able to demonstrate and share with staff that we had signed up to the Charter also added credibility and authenticity, sending a clear message that this was not merely a checkbox exercise, but a sincere effort to understand their experiences.

Moreover, the eleven 'Organisational commitments' that the Charter signed us up to, were already themes that we knew were going to be key areas of conversation. For example, point 4 states 'Establish a clear communications policy'. This has already been a constant area of interest, particularly involving discussions around protocols on emails. Point 6 is about driving down unnecessary workload and we found that utilising the DfE School Workload Reduction Toolkit document became another useful addition to help scaffold addressing this important aspect to improving our staff wellbeing.

The charter has given us a valuable protected framework, but this is just one part of the story.

How to make these conversations happen has been a challenge.

We have explored several approaches to engaging as many staff members as possible. Initially, we allocated a half-termly lunchtime slot in the school meeting room to which everyone was invited, though few had the capacity or time to attend. The journey has not been straightforward, but progress is finally being made. Recognising that some staff found it difficult to attend these sessions, we decided to reverse our approach and visit them instead—and this decision has proven transformative.

My colleague, who co-leads our wellbeing initiatives, and I are now visiting different faculties and staff areas during relaxed lunch breaks (as relaxed as they can be in the school day), discussing the factors affecting individual staff members' wellbeing. Already, common themes are emerging. Crucially, we are connecting with staff who may not have previously attended formal meetings but are comfortable sharing in their own environment. Also, it is a rare pleasure to spend time with colleagues we would not normally interact with, let alone chat with.

The overarching message that is coming through is that yes, staff have plenty of things that they want to share, but they are also genuinely feeling now that they have a voice that is being listened to.

Our next step involves developing a more structured forum where each faculty/staff area appoints a representative to contribute to broader staff discussions, similar to our approach with student Wellbeing Ambassadors. This idea emerged from a staff member during our lunchtime visits to a faculty, demonstrating the benefits of collaborative thinking on a larger scale.

As a coaching school, we have anchored our wellbeing efforts in this perspective and are implementing additional initiatives, particularly leveraging coaching relationships to enhance our Line Management meetings. Overcoming initial concerns about accountability, coaching conversations are helping us redefine the effectiveness of these meetings.

My colleague and I participate in the SLT Wellbeing Steering Group, where we relay general feedback from our staff body—whether concerns or expressions of appreciation. The charter has proven highly beneficial by providing clear focus areas that help depersonalize discussions where differing viewpoints naturally arise.

For me, the true measure of success in prioritising staff wellbeing will be when our conversations become fully open and non-judgmental. This goal is within reach as we share and articulate our daily experiences, collectively recognizing the positive impact of enhanced wellbeing for every staff member, regardless of their role. We have made promising strides on this journey and look forward to seeing where it leads us next.

Laura Anthony MA Ed. Is a Specialist Leader in Education & Learning Manager, offering Coaching, Counselling & Mentoring. She is also the Mental Health Lead at The Hertfordshire & Essex High School

# Case Study

## Kickstarting December: Wellbeing Week

By Mike Tumber

Miltoncross Academy is an inner-city school, serving a moderately deprived area of Portsmouth on the South Coast of the UK. Levels of aspiration and students needs vary wildly, ranging from those who are fully self-sufficient and self-regulating to those who struggle to remember their pen each day. Consequently, staff are – like so many staff in education today – engaged in a constant effort to ensure that the physical, social and educational needs of students are met, and they are often praised by parents, students and external monitors for the work they do in supporting student wellbeing, particularly in the wake of the Pandemic. Of course this does come at a cost, namely their own wellbeing, which can often take a back seat to the needs of students, and to the demands of an increasingly challenging teaching and learning environment.

In some respects, then, Wellbeing Week is a small way to acknowledge and thank staff in all roles across the school for the extra miles they collectively go every day to support students, their families and each other. It is also about providing a moment of respite, and an opportunity to reflect on their own physical and mental health, and the importance of safeguarding their own wellbeing so that they can support others with theirs.

At Miltoncross, our Wellbeing Committee has adopted the mantra 'Wellbeing is a culture, not an event.' It may seem antithetical to this then, to write this article about a weeklong wellbeing event. However, it is important to view Wellbeing Week in the context of a range of measures designed to support the wellbeing and good mental health of staff.

Wellbeing Week takes place in the first week of December, a week that many people find difficult – by then, the nights have closed in sufficiently for most staff to arrive at and leave school in the dark. Temperatures drop, personal anxieties about the impending festivities come to the fore and the looming mountain of the last three weeks of a four-month term hoves into view, replete with dreadful visions of increasingly excited children becoming more and more challenging with the opening of each Advent Calendar window.

Wellbeing Week therefore acts as a springboard into the bleak midwinter, providing small moments of fun and laughter and giving people an opportunity for a bit of downtime and light relief. Everyone, from the Head Teacher and Senior Leaders through to the support staff, LSAs and admin staff are encouraged to participate. As far as possible, the cost is kept low – last year's cost less than £200 - around £2 per person. This is because Wellbeing Week is about making and having fun, something that requires more imagination and creativity than it does lavish spending; in fact, the informal 'homemade' approach somehow feels more rewarding than some expensive, corporate 'forced fun' event otherwise might.

Several events ran throughout the week. 'Thank You' cards were made available for staff to write notes to those colleagues who often go above and beyond to support others, but who are not always acknowledged – these were then posted in a box and delivered to recipients at the end of the week, along with some chocolate. Nostalgic, free-to-enter competitions like Guess the Number of Sweets in the Jar, and Name the Snowman also ran throughout the week.

Another event which spanned the entire week is 'Buddy Week' which is a twist on the 'Secret Santa' concept, with a small hint of 'Elf on the Shelf' thrown in for good measure. Staff signed up for Buddy Week in the run up to Wellbeing Week. Each signee was then assigned a buddy, who they had to surprise during the week; this might include leaving a small treat and a nice note on their desk each morning or simply getting their teacup ready. Others bought small gifts, although extravagant spending was discouraged, as it was not in keeping with the spirit of the week. Buddies were supposed to remain secret, but some people enjoyed guessing anyway.

In addition to these larger events, there were also daily events and competitions. Daily treats – fruit, cake, and hot chocolate – in the staffroom, encouraged people to leave the familiarity of departmental offices and venture out to connect or reconnect with colleagues with whom they don't normally get a chance to speak or interact. It was certainly rewarding to go into the staffroom and see people who are rarely seen in there, chatting and 'catching up' with one another.

Additionally, competitions ran throughout the week. In the run up to Wellbeing Week, staff contributed baby photographs and interesting but unknown facts about themselves for quizzes called 'You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby' and 'Tell Me Something I Don't Know,' both of which were very well received on days one and two. On day three, the Quiz

was 'If Only I Could See Myself as Others See Me' and consisted of a number of pictures of teachers, drawn by Year 7 students – who knew that drawn images could be libellous?! In each case, staff had simply to guess the member of staff in question, and it was great to see people working, laughing, and joking with each other as they tried to work out the answers.

Thursday saw the Great Big Christmas Quiz and The Fabulous (-ly awful) Prize Draw. Previous prize draws saw staff go home with wine, chocolate, cosmetics, and other goods, which caused some deal of disappointment in those whose names were not drawn. This prize draw was different, in that the prizes were as cheap, tacky and tasteless as possible – reindeer hairbands, novelty ties, baubles and Christmas themed rubber ducks were just some of the prizes up for grabs. The upshot was that those whose names were drawn were initially happy - until they saw the prizes - whilst those whose names were not drawn were initially disappointed - until they saw the prizes. This created a real sense of fun, excitement, and silliness – and better still, it just made people laugh. Even today, writing in May, it is still possible to see some of these prizes sitting in classrooms.

Staff feedback in the days that followed Wellbeing Week was overwhelmingly positive. Many people conveyed that the week had had the desired effect and that they were ready to face the final days of the Autumn Term with newfound positivity and energy. Others simply enjoyed the humour and light heartedness of the week, and appreciated the opportunity to be silly, to have fun (and to eat cake and chocolate.)

Of course, the impact was temporary – by the end of the first week back in January, the same stresses and strains had re-emerged. However, Wellbeing Week served the purpose for which it was intended; it helped all staff at Miltoncross over the hump of the first week of December, established a festive mood in the school and gave people a moment to pause, relax and reconnect. Smiles were raised, moods were lifted, and the last three weeks of Autumn didn't feel quite so dismal.

Staff are already looking forward to Wellbeing Week in December 2024, for which plans are already well underway.

Mike Tumber is Head of Ethics and Philosophy at Miltoncross Academy, an inner-city secondary school in Portsmouth. He is also heads up the Wellbeing Committee in the school and can be contacted on [mike.tumber@miltoncross-tkat.org](mailto:mike.tumber@miltoncross-tkat.org)

# The Report comic: a format to start conversations about Wellbeing



# **Case Study**

## **The Report comic: a format to start conversations about Wellbeing**

By Dr Susan Woodshore

What the comic means

This comic is meant to represent many of our schools: well-meaning, with various initiatives and environmental benefits, but still struggling to become person-centred in their approach to staff wellbeing. Only when we get this right are we best able to be present for the young people in our care.

Sasha's untenable workload is starting to affect her family life and Gary ferments in grief-turned-grievance.

We all know them both.

Their school can and must do more to support them, but they also have responsibility for their own wellbeing.

Aileen is the irritating teacher oozing positivity who we all dread seeing in the staff room in case it rubs off on us. But the school leadership team (Them, as Gary calls them) has done everyone a favour by engaging her to do this report: her natural enthusiasm is being channelled towards a goal, and if she was not doing this, she might be finding something of her own to write a critical report about. But is she going about it in the best way?

In conference workshops

As I am writing this, I have just tried this comic out at a Wellbeing Conference with two groups of 35-40 educators from a range of settings. I started by finding some willing volunteers to voice the characters and read it out. After this, we split into small groups and

looked at a range of discussion questions following a basic taxonomical approach. First, we tried to unpick what was happening in the comic and why the different characters felt the way they do. After this, we evaluated whether Aileen's 'list' is helpful, and what they might do if they were conducting a similar exercise.

From this, we moved on to discuss challenges facing staff wellbeing in our own settings, think about what big solutions there might be, and then try to access achievable things we could do or change to improve the situation for us and others.

## Responses

I was pleased with the enthusiasm with which the delegates approached the discussion. Most of them were with people they didn't know but the comic format was effective at breaking the ice. It was easy to imagine these three characters as real people in our settings and (to some extent) empathise with them. I had some great responses and suggestions, with several delegates analysing Aileen's approach in depth.

Why didn't she stay to help Sasha? Why did she leave as soon as Gary said he wanted someone to talk to? And did she just base all her recommendations for school improvement on some random conversations rather than solid data?

We also reflected on the role of the computer 'ping,' and the weird irony that it gives – 'yoga' – and takes away – 'overdue reports' – with the same breath, until everything it says becomes a demand, and what we can do about that.

After discussing achievable steps we could take, the delegates submitted some of their ideas via a QR code, which I can now share with the delegates as a ready-made list of suggestions.

Some of my favourites include:

'Attempt to start a peer-to-peer support group,' 'be mindful of my personal feelings and moods as I arrive at school,' 'take time each day to check in with at least one colleague' and 'be conscious of facilitating demoralising discussions – try to focus on solution and positive actions.'

I hope this means the delegates left the workshop with some positive ideas and things to consider.

Overall, the delegates rated this comic model a 4.29 out of 5 for its potential as a way in for discussions and staff training, with comments including 'loved the concept' and 'liked it and how it fed into discussions'. Suggestions for improvement included explaining the wider context and having representation of diverse types of staff within the school rather than being so teacher focused.

### Pixton and resource development

This was not my first-time using Pixton to create resources. In 2023, a colleague and I were redesigning our school's Mental Health Ambassador program and had a fresh start to develop materials. We aimed for a blend of open discussions, case studies, and instructor-led learning, and we thought a comic-based model could effectively engage a visually oriented generation. For this purpose, I utilised Pixton software (also used here) to depict an imaginary friendship group of early teens and guided them through scenarios covering various aspects of mental health. The program has been active for a year now, and I look forward to sharing it more widely soon.

Dr Susan Woodshore is a teacher of Religious, Moral and Philosophical studies at the Mary Erskine School, part of Erskine Stewart's Melville Schools, a leading family of independent schools in Edinburgh. She runs the school's Mental Health Ambassador Programme and is a key contact for ESMS (Erskine Stewart s Melville Schools).

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# Case Study

## Breaking down barriers at work

By Tom Spindler

For any organisation to operate effectively and continuously improve, staff cohesion and a sense of shared purpose are vital. As the EEF have identified, uniting people around a common goal is crucial for success (2024). At the same time, staff working in education establishments regularly report that enjoying positive relationships with colleagues is one of the key factors which can contribute towards their mental wellbeing while at work (Mind, nd.). It is therefore in everyone's interests to try to foster a collegiate culture in which working collaboratively is the norm. However, the staffing structure of most schools and colleges do not facilitate this: colleagues can often have limited contact with staff working in different departments, leading to a silo culture, a lack of shared understanding and an environment in which the opportunities for the meaningful connections which can do so much to nurture staff wellbeing are restricted. This divide can be particularly acute between teaching staff and colleagues working in non-teaching roles. At St Francis Xavier Catholic Sixth Form College, the team responsible for staff wellbeing has put strategies in place to try to break down these barriers and bridge these divides.

We have the advantage of being a relatively small sixth form college (c. 1300 students) on a single site and we aim to make productive use of our shared spaces. Free snacks - both healthy and not so healthy - are provided in the staff room every Friday to encourage people to gather and mingle. Staff social events such as the Christmas Quiz (where extra points are awarded for teams with members from multiple departments) and the Summer Party are held in the canteen and the quad, emphasising the shared ownership of the site, and fostering an associated sense of community. Our wellbeing programme includes many group activities such as fitness classes, knitting club and staff band; these are attended enthusiastically by teaching and non-teaching staff and are reviewed regularly to ensure they have a broad appeal. In the annual darts competition, colleagues are paired with staff from different departments. Even teaching CPD activities, such as the termly Cognitive Science & Coffee discussion group, are attended by non-teaching staff who have a personal interest.

Most importantly, we have implemented a range of initiatives to stimulate conversations between colleagues from across the college. Each half term we run the Random Coffee Generator: a fancy name for a spreadsheet that sorts colleagues into random pairs. Colleagues are then expected to meet up with their partner at some point during the week for a fifteen-minute chat over a cup of tea or coffee. This adapts in December to become the Random Mince Pie Generator, naturally with seasonally appropriate pastries provided. In spring, colleagues are challenged to hide an Easter egg for their partner to find. The buzz created by these events around the college, as well as the appreciation of a chance to chat with colleagues, is well worth the small shopping bill.

Measuring the impact of wellbeing initiatives can be challenging (Jarden et al, 2023). But there is evidence that the strategy has borne some fruit. The staff wellbeing forum is made up of a mix of support and teaching staff and there is a similar mix of leaders of sessions during wellbeing days, suggesting colleagues from across the college feel invested in the drive to be supportive and inclusive. The most recent Ofsted inspection concluded 'staff feel well cared for' (2023). Staff are invited to participate in a TES Pulse survey each half term, and this consistently shows that staff appreciate that the college encourages positive working relationships between people working in different departments and that colleagues feel well connected to each other.

There is clearly more to do to continue to break down the internal barriers that arise between working in quite different but equally pressurised roles. But the college is proud of the steps it has taken in this direction. As one member of support staff put it: "this place is so inclusive - every day someone puts a smile on my face!"

## References

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Tom Spindler is a Director of Faculty at St Francis Xavier Catholic Sixth Form College, coordinating CPD and leading on staff wellbeing. The college has c.1300 students, the majority of whom live in post codes that attract a financial disadvantage premium, and around 150 members of staff.

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# Think Piece

## Wellbeing at Every Level: A Systems Science Approach

by Emma Coller

In today's dynamic business world, organisations often see their change initiatives fall short or create unintended consequences. Embedding a culture of change and wellbeing requires viewing the organisation as an interconnected system with its unique dynamics. By applying positive psychology systems science, we can intentionally shape change and avoid unintended effects.

Systems science examines the intricate connections within complex systems. Imagine a symphony orchestra, where each musician plays a unique instrument that has a specific role. When the musicians come together and play in harmony, they create a beautiful, cohesive piece of music that is more than the sum of its individual parts. Each instrument's sound reverberates through the concert hall, interconnecting with the others in such a way that it creates a unique auditory experience. If one instrument is out of tune or plays the wrong note, it ripples through the entire performance, potentially leading to dissonance if not carefully addressed.

Positive psychology, a new field, explores the drivers of human flourishing and wellbeing. By integrating positive psychology with systems science, we unlock a powerful framework for navigating change interventions that foster organisational well-being. The layers of the system include me (individuals), we (team), and us (organisation), which create their unique dynamic as they interconnect, much like the sections of an orchestra working together to create a harmonious performance.

Creating a culture of true wellbeing must be approached through a positive psychology systems science lens, with interventions at me, we, and us levels, designed with a clear purpose that unites the entire organisation. Interventions at one level alone will not be impactful, and interventions without understanding the interconnections will unlikely achieve

the intended outcomes, just as focusing on one section of the orchestra without considering how it blends with the others will not result in a cohesive performance.

The first stage of developing lasting change interventions is the creation of a united team brought together for collective impact, often named well-being champions, think of them as the conductors.

Start with the "us" level by creating a shared vision using appreciative inquiry.

Adopt the motto, "Don't do anything about me without me," and ask every person to contribute their ideas to what wellbeing looks and feels like when it is working for everyone. This vital data supports the creation of a well-being charter by your champions that inclusively reflects the voices and opinions of all, like how a conductor gathers input from each section of the orchestra to create a unified interpretation of the music.

A charter alone will have little impact, so move on to the "we" level.

Consider what activities need to happen collectively as a team. According to Paula Davis, teams are the secret to preventing burnout. Using her PRIMED model (Psychological Safety, Relationships, Impact, Mental Strength, Energy, Design), determine if these facets are present or need building into the fabric of the culture. At this level, we must also understand any leadership gaps in knowledge, skills, and competence. Leaders are the tuning function, without effective leadership, just like instruments, people are left out of tune and feeling flat.

Finally, address the "me" layer.

Wellbeing and resilience are skills to be learned. Great governance and outstanding leadership can only take us so far if individuals do not know how to proactively understand and navigate their own wellbeing, much like how each musician must develop their own skills and take care of their instrument to contribute effectively to the overall performance. By understanding the strengths and barriers across each layer and how they interconnect, we can build well-being at all levels of the system, shaping interventions with thoughtful, purposeful care and attention.

Building a culture of well-being is not a quick fix or a box-ticking exercise. It requires a genuine commitment to a positive psychology-informed systems approach, where interventions are carefully considered for their impact across the entire organisation. Only then can we create workplaces that truly support human flourishing and unlock the full potential of our people, just as a symphony orchestra can only create a masterpiece when all sections work together in harmony.

This approach ensures that well-being is woven into the fabric of our organisations. By embracing a systems science perspective and integrating positive psychology principles, we can create lasting, impactful change that benefits individuals, teams, and the organisation. With a carefully crafted approach, just like a conductor unlocks the full potential of each player to create a musical masterpiece, we too can unlock the potential of every person, supporting high performance, motivation, and human flourishing, leading to organisational success and a thriving workforce.

Emma Coller, director and co-founder of Growth Pod, advocates for positive workplace environments and organisational development. She uses her expertise in systems science to coach and train all levels of an organisation, fostering a thriving culture. Growth Pod conducts comprehensive reviews, identifying strengths and areas for improvement to build outstanding organisational cultures. Emma's passion and dedication make her a driving force in organisational and leadership development, helping organisations and individuals reach their full potential.

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