Tips on Reducing Teacher Stress from the Happiest School on Earth

A happy staff makes a happy school and it helps to have the right Twitter handle. Step forward Jeremy Hannay, deputy headteacher @happiestschoolonearth aka the Three Bridges primary school in Southall, west London. He arrived in the UK from Ontario, Canada, and couldn’t believe what he found. “I had never seen so much marking before I came to England. Ontario schools give teachers the professional autonomy to decide when written marking is appropriate and when it would be better to use oral or peer-to-peer feedback,” he says.

“We’ve drastically reduced the amount of written feedback, and yet feedback overall has risen because teachers are giving it orally and encouraging pupils to think about how well they are getting on and what’s next, and we promote pupil-to-pupil feedback.”

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Now teachers no longer struggle home with piles of books to mark and pupils’ achievements have risen. “My belief is that high systems of accountability and scrutiny may improve the bottom 10% of teachers but it stifles the rest. It takes away their autonomy and creativity and that drives away the best people. Our teachers are now able to spend far more time focusing on the individual learners.”

Since Three Bridges implemented the new feedback system the proportion of children achieving the level for their age or above has soared from 67% in 2011 to 87%.

An extra week’s holiday is one secondary school headteacher’s attempt to address the work-life balance. “We are breaking up a week earlier as a reward for all the staff’s hard work this year and they will be able to take advantage of cheaper holiday deals,” he says.

For another headteacher, John Tomsett, of Huntington school in York, less is more. In 2010, three years into his headship, the school’s proportion of pupils achieving five A\*-C grade GCSEs including English and maths suddenly dipped from 60% to 55%. “I sat in my car as the rain pummelled down on the roof and wept. I felt like the loneliest man on the entire planet,” he says.

The next day he picked himself up and looked at the reasons. “That year we had the most intensive year 11 raising attainment plans for English and maths ever. No strategy was left unemployed, and what it was doing was taking the responsibility away from the students, developing a learned helplessness. I stopped most of our interventions, invested in professional development, and trusted my staff to respond with their professional judgment, and they did so brilliantly.”

The school has provided a 10-week programme of mindfulness sessions to help staff to be calmer

Tomsett has told teachers he doesn’t expect them to put on extra revision sessions for GCSE this year as these haven’t had a demonstrable impact. Why do students think 10 one-hour sessions after school when they and their teachers are tired will suddenly make up for their lack of effort over the past 18 months, he asks.

For Lucie Stephenson, head of St Mary’s Catholic primary in Sunderland, closing the school at 5.30, daily meetings with staff and mindfulness sessions are making the 472-pupil school a happy place to work. “There have been a lot of changes and a lot of demands and a lot of last minute decisions from the government that have left staff worried and unsure,” she says.

“I have been a teacher in the classroom taking home 60 or 90 books home at night to mark. In our school you would rarely see teachers going home with a trolley load of books because the teacher and the teaching assistants go round in lessons giving one-to-one feedback,” she says. The school has provided a 10-week programme of mindfulness sessions to help staff manage stress and anxiety. “We are all in it together, no one is more important than anyone else and teachers need to feel appreciated,” she says.

The continual change in education policy is a distraction from teaching, says Edward Conway, head of St Michael’s Catholic high school in Watford.

“All the changes to the curriculum, assessment and exams are coming together and adding to the workload and confusion,” he says. “A number of subjects still haven’t even got the approved exam specifications for September. With all these changes we have had to put other things on hold, such as pastoral meetings and initiatives to benefit the school, because staff need to have something of a life and not be burned out at the end of the year.”