

Building a School of the future

Hear from secondary, primary and special
school leaders making bold ideas a reality



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What does a school of the future look like?



Zoe Marshall
Head of Customer
Success at Arbor

From a new government to the rise of AI, schools have been faced with different challenges and opportunities over the past year. At the same time, the sector continues to brave budget cuts, staff shortages and a workload crisis. In this changing landscape, it’s important that school leaders have the space to explore what the future of work in schools will look like for them?

At Arbor, this is always on our mind. As a technology provider, we want to create tools and support ways of working which make the lives of schools and their staff easier, particularly in the context of change. We believe in building a community which shares best practice, insights and ideas, so that we can all look to that future as a sector.

That’s why, over the past year, we invited leaders and experts to speak on how they’re making big ideas a reality in their schools. This eBook brings together a handful of those voices in the first instalment of our ‘Building a school of the future’ series.

Inside, you’ll find articles on:

- **Strategies for unearthing hidden stories in attendance data**
An interview with Jenny Bates and Nick Morley
- **Changing the narrative in parent-school relationships**
— Part 1. The School Perspective, by Jacqueline Smith
— Part 2. The Parent Perspective, by Cailean Carvalho
- **How, why and when we introduced flexible working in a 1FE Primary School, by Katherine Martindill**
- **AI Advice: Two school leaders share the AI approaches which worked for them**

Over the past five years I’ve been at Arbor, I’ve loved watching our community grow and learn from one another. My hope is that this collection of articles helps to do exactly that, and you leave with exciting ideas to try out in your school.

All the best,

Zoe

A data geek's guide to improving attendance



Jenny Bates

Deputy Head at Cleobury Mortimer Primary School, South Shropshire



Nick Morley

former Headteacher at the Harbour School, an AP and SEMH Special School, Portsmouth. Currently, Director of Education at Horizons Education Trust

What challenges have you faced around attendance in your school?

Jenny Bates: We are one of three primary schools, set in a very rural area of Shropshire with a disproportionately high level of social housing. Our main attendance issues are based around relationships with families who don't value education and finding ways of nurturing those relationships and prioritising education for their children.

Nick Morley: Our school is across multiple campuses: part of the makeup is around alternative provision for students in Year 5 up to Year 11. But we also cater for students with SEMH, and have some hospital school elements attached as well. Prior to me joining the school the school had a really poor Ofsted inspection in December 2022, and so coming into post in September 2023, we had to navigate some quite significant challenges, including big system changes. Similarly to Jenny, we have families who don't value education. Particularly those that have had a bad experience in their own educational journey, so when they reach us, their engagement with school is often broken which then presents as a challenge to navigate.

What prompted you initially to start looking at your attendance data?

JB: Last year, average attendance for our persistent absentees and our Disadvantaged children fell below 85%, which was a huge red flag. Also last year, we moved to Arbor, which actually helped us have better access to our data and gave us a much greater ability to be really precise in pinpointing patterns and identifying student groups. And so it became obvious that this was a priority.

NM: As our school is set over four sites, they have tended to be viewed in silo, which doesn't paint a holistic picture, so we brought all the site's data together using Arbor. We could then start to interrogate that data in a much more coherent and meaningful way. Once we had the data, we created a working group working across our sites. The group includes our Heads of Campus, our SENCOs and DSLs: these people really know the ins and outs of those students. On occasions, we've also invited parents to be a part of the group. It was critical for us to bring together the data and those with contextual knowledge. Anyone that works in school will tell you how the data lays a foundation, but there's always a hidden story to unpick. Having these two insights allowed us to target bespoke strategies to increase attendance percentages for certain cohorts. A one size fits all certainly doesn't work in this kind of context.

A data geek’s guide to improving attendance

Could you talk a bit about the specific processes, reports that you put in place? How did you decide where to start with those and what impact has that made on your schools?

JB: We started with a broader approach: scheduling an Arbor report which gives a general summary and calculates the difference on attendance per student. If it’s an improving picture, you can then automatically send an email home saying great, keep it up. That’s really good for building those relationships and driving positive momentum, even if the percentage increase is only slight. Following that, we set up Arbor so that children whose attendance falls beneath a particular number get added to an intervention and flagged to our team. When a student is consistently in this group, we know to get the family support worker involved. The automation of this means we don’t have to worry about any child getting missed.

We’re also trying to upskill our classroom staff to be more accountable for their attendance data as well. The needs of your class and attendance can easily fall off the radar really in the general melee of every day, once everybody who is supposed to be in school is in. But because you can see the pattern of weekly attendance as you do the register, it’s much easier to spot immediate trends and nip any tendencies in the bud, particularly for those children who might develop bad habits if they don’t think you’re onto them. This isn’t easy, as we know teachers already have an overwhelming amount to do. But really it has to be a two pronged approach, with the attendance team looking at those persistent absentees and overall data, while class teachers spot the early signs and lean on their existing relationships with the children to get ahead.

NM: After working with the Arbor Support Team, we streamlined and created a suite of tailored reports which were sent to key leaders on either a daily or weekly basis. These reports encompassed the key groups in the school, allowing us to pinpoint the right interventions to take. The school has been on a real journey and lost learning time was a key issue as pupils were not in classrooms. The issue that the school faced was that we struggled to articulate where, when and what days of the week this was taking place. Now we have reports for each of the separate campuses, which helps us ask the right questions when we know that a student can’t make a certain lesson i.e what can we do to solve this problem, how can we amend the offer to move things forward positively for that pupil? Is it a change in approach that needs to be put in place? Do we need to think about how teaching is structured and delivered for that young person or groups of people?

A key measure for us at our school is a pupil’s attendance improvement from starting point. Lots of our young people have low attendance (2, 3, 5, 7%) because they’ve been out of school for such a long period of time. By looking at improvement from starting point, we could show that over 70% of pupils had improved from the starting point over the course of the year, which is massive. And that needs to be recognised and celebrated with the pupil, along with their family and carers.

Are national benchmarks your North Star?

JB: I would love to be the kind of educational maverick who ignores all data and benchmarks, but then I also probably wouldn’t have a job! So we absolutely do. It’s actually a really helpful starting point, especially when the bands were published. Even though it initially felt like another metric to be judged by, it’s actually a really good measure by which you can show progress and show the impact of what you’re doing. Those are the questions that you’re asked, particularly under the new OFSTED framework and their focus on disadvantage. Using Custom Report Writer and Custom Groups, we’ve been able to really evidence impact, and we’re really proud because as a trust we’ve moved above the national benchmarks for the first time in a long time.

We’ve also brought our teachers into using benchmarks. Not as another stick to beat them with, but just so there’s an awareness of where the children in their care sit nationally and the risk that therefore poses to their education. I also teach a class, so I am able to demonstrate the ease with which you can use benchmarks effectively without increasing workload. Actually when we had Ofsted in, under the new framework, they were especially interested in how well class teachers could talk to the attendance as well.

NM: Similarly, we’re using the national data, but at this moment in time for us, this tells a really negative story. So being able to dive into the progress of the groups of students over a period of time is a really helpful tool. We also have live data fed through Power BI, so in my role as Head, I can go in and get snapshot headlines of progress across the school, which I am then able to feed into meetings with the wider leadership team.

Could you share an example of where the reporting that you’ve got in place has had a really specific impact on a particular child?

JB: Our attendance intervention has been really powerful for some of our children who are on the cusp of persistent absenteeism. In one particular case, a child in my class had brothers and sisters all over our MAT, living in different households. Because we’re all using Arbor across the trust, we were able to pull the data together and when one sibling wasn’t in school, we could check whether the others were and our shared family support worker could jump straight on that. This helped us identify some hidden push pull factors behind the absences, and we could directly engage with that family. We put wraparound care in place and talked about nursery places for a younger sibling with a health condition. That particular child’s attendance went from 86% to 91% which is a massive win.

NM: We noticed through looking at the data that we had a cohort of young people that were consistently late to school every morning, as late as 11 o’clock, and that all of these children lived within one postcode. By recognising this, we worked with our LA to secure a minibus lease, and then our own staff were able to go and pick that cohort of students up, it was great as we were able to send staff around to pupils houses to bring them into school. Staff members had positive relationships with the pupils so were able to carefully navigate any challenges and get the pupils into school. The pupils then had a soft landing then when they came into school, a key work session with their trusted adult which would focus on the things that are going on outside of school, and we could also then make sure they’d had some breakfast each morning. For lots of our young people, lack of breakfast, tiredness, and behaviours over the weekend can be really difficult.

“It has to be a two pronged approach, with the attendance team looking at those persistent absentees and overall data, while class teachers spot the early signs and lean on their existing relationships with the children to get ahead.”

A data geek's guide to improving attendance

How have you made attendance data accessible to relevant staff, and got the buy-in needed for staff to take action with it?

JB: It's all about the standard principles of change management - taking things one step at a time, introducing things bit by bit and showing the benefits of what you introduced. That way you can build things into people's daily routines. The smallest changes have an incredibly high impact. Often, you'll get buy-in from class teachers when they see that the children who we really need to be in school to keep them safe and to allow them to make the best progress they can are in school. It makes the extra effort they're putting in worthwhile.

There's always going to be some entry-level eye rolling at the staff meeting and that's because change is difficult. Plus, attendance is so caught up in the new Ofsted framework and that kind of thing gets negative publicity, so it can quickly be seen as another job to do. So there's always got to be some audit of taking something away to make the new workload manageable, and that's completely appropriate and right. But when it comes down to it, the workload addition is minimal because the information you need is surfaced right there on the screen when you do the register, in a tool you're already using. It really makes it straightforward. There are also things we've done to get pupil and staff buy in, such as instigating a reward for the class with the best attendance each week, a 15 minute headstart on the playground equipment!

NM: We ran a session at the start of the year reinforcing with staff the importance of attendance, the journey that we're on, the improvements we've made, and giving clarity around roles and responsibilities. At our weekly SLT meeting, we looked at attendance as our first agenda item, and we're also providing our subject leaders specific subject-based attendance training so that they can start

to deep dive and have those conversations with their teams as well. Naturally, we report on attendance during local governing body meetings as well. We all know attendance is a journey. There's some quick fixes but to change a culture for attendance takes time and I think it's being realistic around the time frames for that.

What one piece of advice would you give to schools that are starting on this initiative?

JB: Don't try and do everything, everywhere all at once. Take it steady and do one thing well, embed that and then move on to the next thing.

NM: Have proper discussions with your teams about what data is accessible at the moment. Is it giving you the information that you need to be able to address the concerns that you have? I would then highly recommend talking to the team at Arbor, if you're not able to construct and build those reports, as they will support you with that, because once you get the infrastructure right, the next part of the process takes care of itself.

Collaboration, community and communication:

How we're approaching parental engagement



Jacqueline Smith
SENCO at Progress
Schools

Effective parental engagement is a complex wheel, because it looks different for different parents and communities.

Some parents might want high-level updates, whereas others might want to have far more information more regularly. Sometimes we need to liaise more with other guardians and carers. So from that point of view, effective parental engagement is about dynamism. We need to meet parents where they are and reduce barriers as much as possible: it comes down to being informed and the accessibility of that information.

Since the pandemic, parents have held us to account in ways they never have before. Schools used to be authoritative places, which switched overnight to becoming far more of a pastoral space, with the demand for mental and physical health support growing exponentially. It grew because the need did: poor mental health has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which was traumatic for many children. But since then, parents have asked more questions, such as what we are doing to support their children. Equally important, a lot of parents were working from home at the same time as schooling from

home during lockdowns, most of whom likely don't have GCSEs or haven't gone on to higher education, making it a deeply stressful time for both parties. That means since then, communications have generally needed to be more frequent and more tailored. But there's a tension there — schools are complicated organisations with so many moving parts.

Meaningful strategies we've adopted

As with many schools, we also find that parents have had a failure of service, and often carry expectations or trauma from their own experiences at school. That's why we've got such a focus on accessibility. We've found that informal comms, such as via mobile, are really beneficial for our parents as they strip away that boundary and feeling of expectation. Our aim is to make parents feel scaffolded, and all of our comms are designed to be restorative of that parent-school relationship. The language you use is paramount. It's got to be supportive and comfortable, it's got to have soul: a message which is clearly automated for all only adds to pre-conceived ideas that their child is not prioritised.

Especially as we are a SEND organisation (though this also applies to all school types) our children are often living in a fair amount of chaos. Additionally, we have high deprivation. There are a lot of question marks around student's safety, around their family's financial security, we have some families who live in hotels and move around a lot. And so it's important for us to be clear, concise and not add to this chaos, thereby managing expectations. We don't want our parents to miss messages and then feel like everything is falling apart because they have been overwhelmed with other aspects of life. So when it comes to digital communication, that's what has worked well for us: informal updates via mobile, routine, brevity and clarity.

Moving away from technology, I would say the main strategy we've used to build the parent-school relationship is just by being human and lending a listening ear. Parents want to be heard. By giving them space to do so creates a huge shift in everything else, because trust is at the core of all relationships. Once a parent knows you are interested in what they have to say, it can actually create a wonderful space which buffers any of those pre-learned behaviours. They are no longer in a position of defence.

This comes down to finding opportunities to actually hear what parents have to say and then going from there. And it's about meeting their concerns and suggestions not only with a listening ear, but with realistic and honest responses: I'm really interested in getting this right for you, it will look like this.

The role of data

Data can be underrated sometimes. Of course, it doesn't tell you everything you need to know, but it gives you such a strong premise to start with. Because of the diversity among our school populations, there are so many micro and macro trends to unpack.

Looking at questions such as, are our learners with ASD performing at a slower rate than our learners with SEMH. Or is that our learners with OCD are not attending as much as they should? What can we do about that? Data is imperative to everything because it gives you a starting point and a guide, especially when we're thinking about how to bring in parents and work together in the best interest of the children.

For instance, by analysing the data, we could see that behaviour by time of day really fluctuated for one child. Digging deeper, we uncovered a pattern of misbehaving in maths. We then met with the child, the teacher and their parents, and through this found that said learner had an unidentified need: dyscalculia. This was having a significant impact on their ability to access that lesson, meaning they misbehaved in

a way that got them removed from that classroom. By having that data and identifying the need, we could work closely with the parent in question to help support the child. As it happened, we also found through these open lines of communication that there were learning needs within the family as well, which gave us a better understanding of the whole picture.

Every school has its idiosyncrasies in terms of geography and demographics. Matching the data of your school, for example attendance or behaviour, to align with that of the local area can be really revealing and inform your parent-school strategy. For instance, there might have been a number of jobs laid off in one local area or a TikTok trend happening in another, all of which can lead to targeted and supportive communications to those particular parents. We also don't just try and send messages out, or invite parents in. We are all about belonging within our local communities. We do food bank work, charitable clothes donations.

Training our staff

When teachers or new staff start at schools, they'll often come with a really positive, change-the-world attitude, which we want to keep! We don't want them disheartened by a parent tribunal or negative interaction with someone at the school gate. Mentoring is imperative with

new staff from individuals who have that breadth of experience, because it can otherwise leave staff feeling daunted and disheartened. It's critical that you coach all of your new staff to deal with and understand parents, as they will come at the school from many angles, some appropriate and some not.

We do lots on family leadership within our space, which I'm a real advocate for. As a neurodiverse parent, I get significant anxiety if I forget something, so I really need my children's schools to scaffold me with that. For our staff, it's about understanding those feelings and those needs for those parents. Equally, it's about balancing what staff in schools can actually handle and deal with, and making it a safe and non-judgmental space for both parties.

Ultimately, you've got to standardise your approach as much as possible, in a friendly, safe and accessible way. We've got micro-scripts for those colleagues who might need additional support in these instances, and most importantly, we have a collective support system within the school where we learn from one another and share best practice.

“Once a parent knows you are interested in what they have to say, it can actually create a wonderful space which buffers any of those pre-learned behaviours.”

But what about the parent perspective?



Cailean Carvalho

Head of Schools, Parent-Friendly Schools, a service by Parentkind, the UK's parent charity

At Parentkind, we're looking at the parent-school relationship from a mechanical level.

And we've delivered 500 different measures of how schools engage with their parents across the ethos and behaviours, their communication, how they empower learning at home, how they get volunteers, how they direct parents to other resources in the community.

Schools have to do an overwhelming amount to engage parents, who can be hard to live with but impossible to succeed without. Often, everyone wants a different service.

In the pandemic, the emerald curtain was pulled back and parents could see that it wasn't quite magic that happened when their kids went to school: this caused a huge lack of trust. From Parentkind's dataset — the widest dataset on parent mindset in the UK — we know that 50% of parents now do not believe that daily attendance is essential. This, coupled with the evidence that 10% of students across the UK in any phase of education miss more school than they attend and 23% are persistently absent, is a national crisis.

It comes back to this stat: 52% of parents believe that schools are not listening to them. While we can't expect schools to have the time, resource or expertise to become marketing agencies overnight, the one-size fits all messaging and lack of facilitation of two-way communication is meaning that parents frequently disengage. This mistrust and disillusion has manifested in hugely inappropriate ways: we know that 82% of school leaders have been assaulted by a parent in the last year, 68% have experienced threatening behaviour or weaponised social media. A fifth of schools have had to ban a parent from the school grounds. It's clear that this situation isn't going to fix itself.

What are the causes?

From a parent point of view, we see there's three key causes:

- **The cost-of-living crisis**
For those of you that are SEND schools, we see that 33% of parents who have a SEND child have taken out a loan in the last year to pay for school costs. We see 23% of them dependent on food banks monthly.
- **Mental health plight**
From a wider point of view, 22% of parents are depressed. In the UK, 53% of children have had a mental health episode
- **Overcoming personal trauma**
Individuals carry their own psychological challenge of parenting from their own experience. In really challenging areas of deprivation, parents will often have attended the same school that their children now attend, so there's a legacy impression which is a difficult cycle for schools to break

What do we do?

We're working really hard with our schools and parent groups to heal that harmony. In our experience, we often find that schools will try a little bit too hard on the 'what.' This means they often just tell parents what they need to do: come in for parents' evening, you need to sign this, you need to help here. Sometimes, schools will throw in an incentive, like pizza or coffee. What we're encouraging schools to do is focus on the 'why.'

Here are some findings from our work with

the Education Endowment Foundation:

- Parent participation equals four whole months of additional academic progress every single year
- If you're involved, your child is twice as likely to go to university
- If you're involved, your child is likely to earn £13,000 more a year in their career

Sharing these with parents takes them off the daily treadmill of school demands, and brings them on the journey with their child. It gives their attendance and attention a sense of purpose.

Setting the tone

The parent-school relationship is particularly important when a child first starts, as you set the tone for the future relationship. And often, schools do this very well with welcome materials and lots of onboarding communication. After this initial onboarding period, however, we often see that these strong relationships are lost completely. It's critical to set expectations, and stick with them. What is the behaviour you expect from your parents? How do you want them to communicate with you? How and when should they expect to hear from you? And when the time is right, reset those expectations to make sure parents are always kept in the loop, when they need to be.

There are plenty of other touchpoints which we know need honing in schools, where often the proper training isn't in place. That could be anything from running a successful parent survey through to how to handle a parent complaint. We believe that all of these things are worthy investments to nurture and restore the trust between parents and schools. To find out more about the resources we offer, visit www.parentfriendlyschools.org

Thinking differently about AI

Stephen, former teacher and current Head of AI at Arbor, shares his thoughts on the challenges and opportunities of AI that face school leaders.



Stephen Higgins
Head of AI at Arbor

Stephen is a former secondary school teacher and middle leader. He spent five years working on Arbor's product before spending time working on data and AI products for the NHS and private sector. In 2024, he returned to Arbor, this time as the Head of AI.

AI It's a bit of a buzzword, but it's also changing the world of education as we know it.

Throughout 2025, Arbor has hosted roundtable discussions, webinars and forums where we've invited school and trust leaders to summarise their feelings about AI. Overwhelmingly, the responses always take the form of 'Excited but...' nervous, cautious, sceptical, daunted. Attendees expressed the concerns and obstacles which normally come with big technology changes, like budget constraints, time restrictions, lack of resource, creating more workload and data protection. But there was also a big sense of, as one leader put it, "not knowing what I don't know."

Schools and trusts are used to having to make big technological changes while already operating under budget pressures and the everyday challenges of school life. During lockdown, schools had to introduce new systems almost overnight to support their community of students and parents, which allowed them to teach, track and operate remotely. And more recently, the shift to cloud software from on-premise solutions has been seismic. So, the education sector is not immune to digital transformation. But the pace of change and data security concerns around AI, mean that its rapid rise has brought with it a culture of nervousness and a sense of the unknown.

Let's change our mindset. Schools and trusts are brilliant at adapting under pressure, and with a little broadening of our horizons, I believe that our organisations can start to get the most out of the exciting opportunities that AI has to offer. In this article, I encourage you to go back to the beginning, reopen those conversations around AI into ones of potential, and encourage a culture of community and cross-trust collaboration.

Broadening horizons

Let's start with how we think about AI as education leaders. Many AI-in-education conversations come back to ChatGPT (or other LLMs), and its relation to teaching and learning. Whether that's on students using AI for their homework, or teachers creating lesson plans and resources. These are important conversations to have, but they also mean that our AI worldview is yet to broaden beyond the classroom.

Similarly, The Key, in their survey of 1,741 school staff, found that those on the teaching side are far more likely (64%) to use AI tools in their work and everyday life than administrators (44%), governance staff (36%) and SBMs (32%). The survey also found that 'Drafting, improving or summarising comms' (63%) and 'Teaching and learning activities' (55%) are the most popular tasks respondents use AI for.

There are thousands of touchpoints and processes that take place everyday across your organisation, between different members of staff. Imagine you could use AI as a digital tool to automate every repeated, manual task - how would that transform your school? From tasks as simple as sending an email with a report attached, through to large-scale data analysis, identifying and taking action based on recruitment patterns, and dashboard creation.

How you identify those manual tasks, no matter how great or small, will depend on the size of your school. But my advice to those feeling overwhelmed would be to start here, with bluesky thinking and task-based mapping.

Here are some tasks to get you started:

- Write down the top ten administrative tasks you do and how often
- Write down a 'day in the life' of your role, task by task
- Identify which of these tasks could be done by AI (with you in the loop) and research if any of your existing tools have features which can do said task for you

We recently put a collection of templates together to help you do these tasks and measure their success. The AI Guidebook also contains tips on how LLMs work, suggested AI principles and safeguarding information to make sure that you embed effectively and securely. Download your free copy by scanning the QR code.

We're all in the same boat

The education space lends itself to collaboration and community. Trusts and schools are not in a competitive market. I mean this in the sense that the success of one school, if success is measured by the academic attainment and positive wellbeing of its students, would be applauded by another. This gives us a unique opportunity in the education sector to work together as we navigate the challenges and opportunities of AI.

We're also learning in tandem with schools here at Arbor. Even with a dedicated AI Team, we know the importance of being part of a knowledge-sharing community of schools and trusts. That way, we know the features we're releasing are meaningful and impactful.

What does that look like in practice?

Knowledge sharing is crucial and useful, but it doesn't always make it easy to implement. The practical adoption of AI in schools and the change management that comes with it raises its own questions. How do you create an AI policy when staff are already using OpenAI models to analyse sensitive data? How do you embed AI into your ways of working and train up all your staff to do the same, without creating more workload? How do I know what will have the most impact, first? Of course, there is never a one size fits all answer, but the more we share, the more we can move forward and learn as a community.

If you're right at the beginning of your AI journey, you should always start by making it crystal clear to staff that they should not be using free, personal accounts with any OpenAI LLM. Once you've got strong policies in place around data protection, then you can really start to think about operational efficiency at large. Once you have an idea of security and policy in place, I will always encourage leaders to come back to that question - if you could automate all admin, how would that change your school?

While it can be daunting that "we don't know what we don't know", the learning and innovation is there for the taking. It can sometimes feel cheesy to finish on a quote, but this one from Peter Shilton feels fitting: "If you stand still, there's only one way to go and that's backwards."



Scan the QR code to download your free AI Guidebook

“If you could automate all admin, how would that change your school?”

Making flexible working a reality at our school



Katherine Martindill
Headteacher at
Templemead Primary
School

Our school is a small, one-form entry primary school. So for us, flexible working hasn't been about having an ambassador or a strategic project, it's been down to the culture.

And I believe, from speaking with trusts and schools of all shapes and sizes, that this culture is the main starting point regardless of your structure. My belief is that if you have happy staff, you have happy children. And, while there are a number of things that lead to happy staff, one of the big ones is balance, autonomy around their day and the flexibility and freedom not usually found in a school working life.

Where did we start?

Everything started from a small request here and there, with each request looked at individually and separately. When I started as the Head at Templemead, I made it clear that family comes first. And that's not because I've got low expectations of my staff. It's because I will always come back to that principle of having happy staff. I also made it very clear that my door is open, and I want people to engage with me as the Headteacher and share their concerns or ideas. This is how you change a culture: bit by bit.

There were very firm rules when I first arrived. Often unspoken. You had to be in school at a certain time, you couldn't leave till a certain time. You had to run this many clubs, you had to do X many things in your lunch hour. I changed a lot of that quite quickly, removing that rigidity.

In practice

The second step I took was getting to know the staff and what was going on in their minds. I had one member of staff who was going to leave because she just couldn't manage the workload; it was impacting her family life and marriage. I met this with questions rather than finalities: is there anything that we can do to be able to support you? What could make things better? She just hadn't even considered that an alternative route would be considered. Just from asking the question, we were in a position to work on a solution together, which ended up being a four day week in the classroom, and PPA on the other day.

As educators, we know that if the children in our school feel well connected, they feel like they belong, they feel like they're valued and cared about, then they come to school and they learn and they thrive. It's exactly the same for staff. If they feel that their views are being listened to, if they feel like their wellbeing is a priority, if they feel like they can express their concerns and be met with consideration, then they are also going to thrive.

It's worth mentioning that a lot of the time, flexible working requests are only temporary. Whether there's someone ill on the outside or a difficult period for a dependent, solutions are often short-term. That means there doesn't always need to be sweeping structural changes. And it also means that you don't lose great staff over temporary issues that they're facing in their personal lives.

'Flexible' meets 'fair'

One of the points of understanding I have with my staff is that not every request will be granted. The point is that there will always be a conversation. Of course, we have a policy, but there isn't a one size fits all solution as every request might be different.

For instance, I introduced PPA at home in our school, which some loved and others did not, they'd rather be in school. I openly said to the staff, I don't mind what you do during that time, if you want to go shopping or go to the gym or come back from a weekend away late, I don't mind. Staff could swap their PPA, they could do what they wanted, because I recognise that there is very little flexibility sometimes, and it impacts the little things we do in our everyday.

There have been other conversations I've held with members of staff where we've realised the solution we've put in place isn't necessarily right in the long term. One example is when I had a staff member return from maternity leave. We reduced their hours while her child was settling into nursery, but she quickly recognised that this was not a long-term solution for her, her child or the class she was supporting. The important thing about this example is that we had open dialogue throughout.

“As educators, we know that if the children in our school feel well connected, they feel like they belong, they feel like they’re valued and cared about, then they come to school and they learn and they thrive. It’s exactly the same for staff”

Impact on our students

I really have very little issue with absences. I was able to tell parents who their new teacher was in April, because of the confidence that teachers weren't going to resign. That means we've been able to start that transition work with our children a term early, which we were also able to do last year. So the impact on retention of all staff has been extremely positive, which benefits everyone. Of course, this can be tricky on the budget, but it speaks to the culture we have here. Plus, in my opinion, the children will thrive as long as you communicate with them what they should expect. Children can adapt very effectively.

Absence tensions

One of the greater challenges is with parental perception. Certainly in a primary school context, parents want to see the same face every morning, and so we try our best to communicate with parents the changes in place and why. The biggest tension which interests me is that the DfE are all about schools being flexible and trying to recruit and retain staff, but equally have an agenda around absences for children and not authorising holidays during termtime. One of the ways that we have offered flexibility here is that staff can take unpaid leave

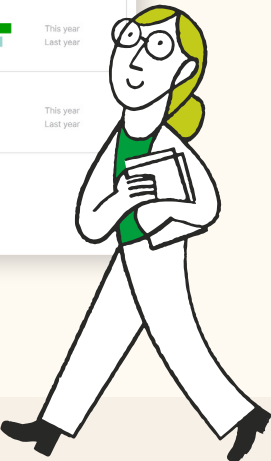
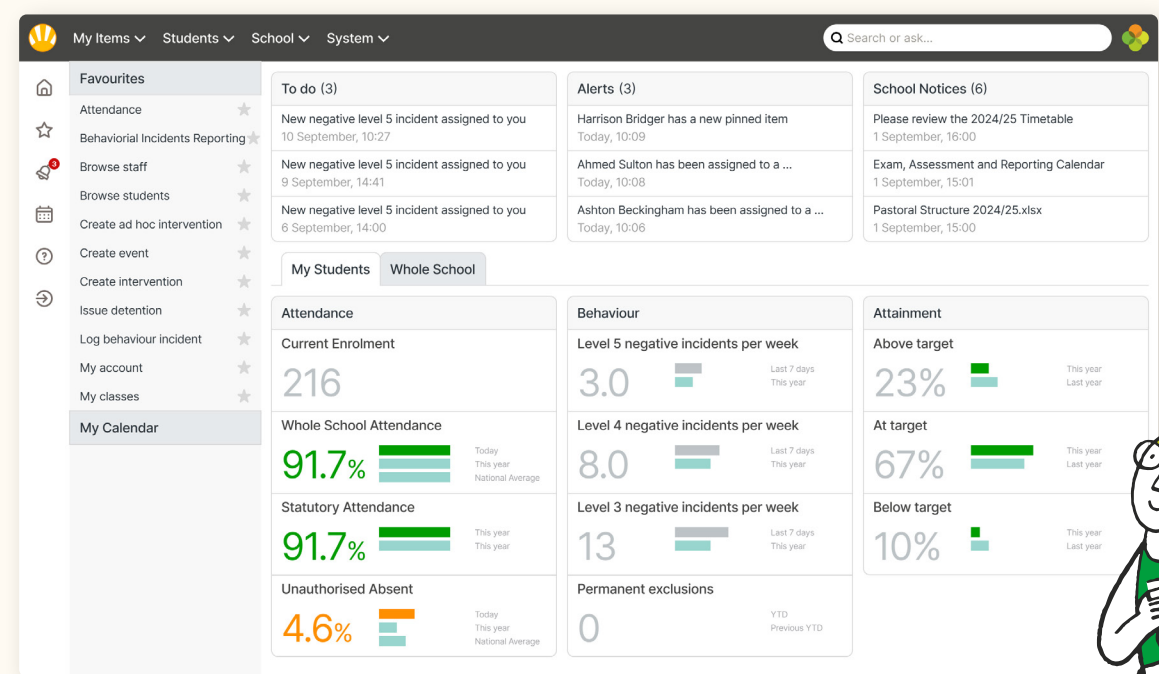
quite freely. They can also take paid leave at points depending on policy. So I have had members of staff who have left term two days early to go on a holiday that I have allowed. And some of that has been greeted with a little bit of challenge from parents because it's frowned upon that they are not able to do that. So I, as a headteacher, have made a decision not to fine parents who take their children on holidays and to be very open with parents about that. That honesty has developed our culture even further and our absences are low.

Parting advice

The first thing a school can do is be open to the idea of flexible working. There aren't always times when things are appropriate or fixable, but to commit to an open dialogue to staff requests will get you a long way in terms of culture. I genuinely believe that staff who feel happy and valued and cared for, give more. They go the extra mile because they know that I will do that for them where I can.

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