How Governors Can Support Whole-School Wellbeing

To get it really right, mental health needs to be a theme that runs through all of our governance work, rather than simply an add-on. Good mental (and physical) health are the bedrock on which all other activities within our setting are founded. When we get it right, it may go almost unnoticed. When we get it wrong, things start to fall apart.

It doesn't have to be a big job, we simply need to get used to bearing mental health in mind during our general governance work and being curious about which decisions and actions will help, rather than harm wellbeing. Think about it like safeguarding; even when safeguarding isn't on the agenda, it's on the agenda – because keeping children safe is at the heart of every decision we make and action we take.

Promoting positive mental health is like an extended version of that, only it affects every member of your wider community, children and adults alike.

To begin with, let's talk general principles. Mentally healthy schools are schools where:
- Happy, healthy children are more readily able to engage in learning and play.
- Staff recruitment and retention are positively affected – people will want to work with you and the risk of burn-out and break-down is reduced.
- Whole-school strategy is positively affected as happy, healthy adults are well engaged and able to make and follow through on decisions positively and confidently.
- Sickness, absence and presenteeism are reduced in both students and staff who are happier and healthier both physically and mentally (because mental health and physical health are deeply intertwined).
- Senior leaders are effective, and engaged and long-term absence is low. Succession planning is possible as staff are up for the challenge of taking on the responsibilities of more senior positions and haven't been scared off by stress and burn-out which can be endemic among senior leaders in less mentally healthy schools.
- Families choose your school above others for its positive, nurturing environment and great outcomes for students.
- You become more reachable for harder-to-reach communities and engagement between school, home and the wider community improves.

Three top tips
More specifically, here are the three things I think are doable right away and which will not take up oodles of time – but will be highly impactful

1. **Appoint a named lead governor for mental health**
   The key responsibility of this person is to always bear mental health and wellbeing in mind and to ensure that all policies, processes, decisions and actions are considered through the lens of mental health as well as the myriad of other lenses you are employing. Ideally, the lead governor should have a corresponding link person within the school staff such as the designated senior mental health lead or equivalent.

2. **Make the mental health of senior leaders a priority**
   Many schools I work with are doing wonderful things when it comes to promoting the wellbeing of their staff and students, but this is often led by one very burnt-out head or deputy. Make it your job to consider the mental health of those sitting at the top of the tree within your setting. Be a critical friend to them and encourage them to take the steps they need to ensure their own mental health so they can continue to do a great job looking out for everyone else.

3. **Be aware of burn-out and proactively navigate crunch points**
   There are certain points in the academic year which are notoriously challenging for staff and/or students. Points where we can barely drag ourselves out of bed and keep going, let alone give of our best selves every day. That third week in November, the lead-up to mocks or exams, and early February have been prime suspects in schools I have governed in England.

Identifying and planning for the peaks and troughs in the mental health of staff and students can help to keep everyone happy and healthy and avoid burn-out and absences. As a governing body, you are in a position to take strategic decisions that can have a big impact on the whole staff so long as you plan ahead.

Start by identifying the "low weeks" and then brainstorm together whole-school approaches that could be taken to relieve the pressure in those weeks when everyone is most fragile and give staff and students a chance to reset and refresh themselves instead. Ideas I have seen work well include:

- **A duvet week:** When there are no meetings or other commitments before school and everyone can get a little more shut-eye.
- **A homework hiatus:** Students get a break from homework and consequently, staff get less marking for a few days.
- **Team-teaching or off-timetable week:** By co-delivering lessons or having a special timetable for the week, the planning load can be reduced for staff. Even better if the week has a wellbeing/mental health focus for students. The planning of this kind of week can create additional work for some staff, but it can be planned ahead and what works well can often be adapted year-on-year.
- **Careful planning of your meeting calendar:** When looking at the year ahead, identify the low weeks and commit to keeping them meeting-free. One meeting-free week a term can make the world of difference to a flagging staff body. As well as halting regular meetings for a few days, be careful to ensure that parents' evenings or other large commitments are scheduled outside of these times.

As a governing body, you will likely have other ideas that might work well in your setting so get imaginative. Small things will make a big difference if you lean into them.

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