Adapting to change

Lessons for MAT leaders in navigating and moving forward after a crisis

A collection of interviews with trust CEOs during the Covid-19 crisis, sharing advice for how to support your schools through constant change and prepare for whatever the future brings

Introduction

By James Weatherill, CEO at Arbor Education

As MAT leaders there has never been a moment where so much change happened in such a short period of time. In the past six months every trust has been forced to adapt almost all processes overnight to safeguard and support staff, students and the wider community. Whilst this has been an incredibly tough time (I hope you got a break over the summer), it's also taught us a lot, including how agile, bold and resilient schools could be.

At Arbor we've seen a lot of new ideas and practices emerge over the Spring and Summer terms from the 100+ MATs we work with, and have been holding weekly webinars with MAT leaders on strategies they've put in place to help adapt to this change.

This book is a concise write-up of practical tips and tactics from MAT CEOs centered on the broad topics of Leadership, Student and Staff Wellbeing and Online Learning. You'll see how others have wrestled with pivoting their organisations quickly, defining how much autonomy to give to schools, making sure staff don't burnout and how to ensure quality when teaching online. Hopefully it will stimulate a few new ideas as you look ahead to the future.

I'd like to thank all the authors and those on our webinars for being so open and brave in sharing their experiences as they happened. No one's pretending they have all the answers, but if there's ever been a time to experiment with new ways of working it's now, and I'm encouraged by what I see.

Our mission at Arbor is to help centralise your insight, improve your communications and streamline how you work across your trust. If you'd like to find out more about how we can help, please get in touch.

I look forward to seeing you online in our next series of MAT webinars this term, or even one day in person!

James Weatherill
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About Arbor

Arbor helps schools and trusts of all sizes work more easily and collaboratively, with intuitive tools designed to make a difference.

Arbor MIS
Arbor MIS gives schools the tools they need to work better today and be ready for tomorrow. Used by over 1,200 schools across the country, it's the fastest growing MIS today.

Arbor MIS for MATs and Groups

See the bigger picture with the only true MIS for MATs. More than just a dashboard, Arbor MIS for MATs is custom-built for better collaboration across your trust, with tools that make working together easier at every level.

To learn more, visit www.arbor-education.com

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Each chapter focuses on a key area where MAT leaders pivoted their strategy during the Covid-19 crisis. The authors also share their lessons for how to be prepared as a leader for change going forward.

When the Strategic Plan just doesn't cut it! Lessons for leaders in a global crisis

By Mark Lacey, CEO at Diocese of Salisbury Academy Trust

Mark's interview took place on 1st May 2020

How well prepared were you for the Covid-19 crisis?

I don't think anyone was prepared for what has happened, but what we benefited from is we have a clear strategic plan, business continuity plan and risk register which gives us a strong backbone and allows us to adapt and flex when external events occur.

We also pride ourselves on having an adaptive culture at the trust. We recognise that we don't always have all the answers, but that it's more important to share best practice, collaborate, and be open to admitting when we're doing something wrong. This allows us to change direction fast.

How did you adapt to the crisis?

Earlier in the year, we had already experienced a large challenge – we went through seven Ofsted inspections over a period of 10 weeks – which forced us to adapt quickly. This served as a test in some ways for what was to come with Covid-19 and we were able to learn important lessons so we could easily switch to a new rhythm of working.

Given our schools are spread over quite a wide geographical area, we made sure above all that we worked tightly as a Central Team and that we set a clear direction. It was important that we were responsive in relaying information as soon and as clearly as possible to schools, and that we were accessible for whatever schools needed.

What have you learned about being responsive in a crisis?

The speed at which we've adapted to ensure emergency provision has shown us just how much potential we have for change. It's also proven to us the importance of building into our strategic planning a focus on people over process. We know staff will continue to feel vulnerable sometimes going forward and we believe taking a compassionate approach and prioritising wellbeing is really important.

When you return to more normal operations, how will your "people over process" approach change the way you work?

Putting people first is a difficult thing to measure and be certain about, but there are some concrete measures we can put in place. For example, we've seen that easy-to-use, shared IT systems like Office 365 take a lot of burden away from staff and can help them feel connected. We also try to gauge how staff are doing by sending out digital forms and bringing representative groups of staff together to discuss certain issues. We aim to use the feedback we get from staff to build into our policy making going forward. A big emphasis across the trust is also social and personal development.

How do you monitor wellbeing when working remotely?

A big focus of ours as a Central Team is looking after our Headteachers. Our Academy Improvement Team members have each taken responsibility for a group of Heads whom they meet with every week using Microsoft Teams (video chat). Every meeting starts with questions about their wellbeing – it's been important for us to understand all the different struggles Heads are dealing with at the moment, such as spouses who are key workers or having children at home. We're learning a lot, and fast, about how to sense how staff are doing from their body language and tone over video. Many of the tensions Heateachers found with staff at the beginning involved miscommunications over email, so we've actively encouraged video chat to bring a personal approach.

Keeping regular lines of communication has also been really important. We've converted our monthly bulletins to weekly bulletins focused on wellbeing, in order to make sure everyone has access to helpful resources.

How has your leadership style changed during Covid-19?

The most challenging thing we've faced as a Central Team has been working remotely and not being physically in each school. Whilst my natural leadership style is collaborative and approachable, this has been essential to emphasise even more, making Headteachers aware I'm here if they need.

Of course, we've been direct and interventionist where it was necessary. For example, we felt it was important to bring some schools together into hubs so that we had greater control of emergency provision and more staff could shield, despite some resistance from Headteachers.

How have you been using tech to adapt?

Because we've invested quite considerably in digital tools over the last two years, we didn't have to suddenly bring on lots of new systems to cope with remote working. This crisis has shown us the real value of having systems like Arbor's cloud-based MIS and Office 365 in place to rely on. It's meant we can share data within and between schools easily, and communicate with parents using tools staff are comfortable with already. Some of our schools weren't using all of the communications features before the crisis, but Arbor switched these on swiftly for us.

We've also seen the benefit of Arbor in our financial management during the crisis. We were able to set up our own Free School Meal voucher scheme and get all the data we needed from Arbor. Setting up students on Microsoft Teams has also made a lot of impact. Going forward, we're going to ensure everyone has access to a remote learning platform.

Has this crisis challenged your expectations on how quickly you can implement change?

It's shown us the importance of being clear about what we all need to do together and what will have the most impact. It's given us conviction and belief to step into changes more boldly in future.

What are your future plans?

Having learned from this current situation, we're going to be cautious about making too many plans going forward. Being able to adapt is much more important. We've got to be realistic about what can be achieved over the next year, given schools will need time to recover.

In terms of planning towards wider school opening, we're trying to make neutral decisions by weighing up the polarised spread of views out there. We've put together a risk assessment and planning document for our exit from the Covid-19 situation which outlines key questions and issues, and the trust responses to each of them. It also provides space for schools to add their responses.

What are your key takeaways from the Covid-19 crisis?

I hope we will all go forward with a greater appreciation for what we have and more compassion for each other. I have been incredibly impressed with everything our staff have achieved and will not forget it. As a Central Team, we will aim to take collective responsibility for who we are as a trust and move forward with a strong moral compass.

About the author

Mark Lacey is the CEO at Diocese of Salisbury Academy Trust, a MAT of 18 academies across Wiltshire and Dorset. Previously, Mark served as Headteacher in a large, challenging primary school in South Bristol, and also led the development of the Malago Learning Partnership, a collaboration of nine local schools.

Mark has a Business Degree from the University of Bath as well as a Masters, with distinction, in Educational Leadership and Management from the University of Worcester, the latter of which focused on the effective features of collaborative partnerships between schools.

Centralisation or autonomy in a crisis?

By Kate Davies, CEO at White Woods Primary Academy Trust
Kate's interview took place on 3rd July 2020

What was the situation when you came in as CEO?

When I first joined the trust there wasn't much sense of a trust identity or shared culture. School leaders met occasionally but largely these meetings were taken up with discussions about operational matters and finance. Although the schools were working in MAT, they weren't really benefiting from many of the opportunities that it can bring.

How did you approach the challenge of coming in as a new CEO? Did you make changes straight away?

I relished it and I was really lucky that I was welcomed with open arms by my Headteachers. My leadership style is relational; I say it how it is and I think that openness and honesty is really important if you want to gain trust. I'm not sure if I'll be successful but I want people to adapt and change because they believe in something or at least understand it. I want change and development to be authentic, not simply done because it's been directed. The first thing I did was work with Directors, Heads and Governors to establish a core set of values that would underpin our work moving forward - the four C's: Collaboration, Curiosity, Child-centred and Challenge.

I've tried to be thoughtful about what we've changed. Some things were relatively straightforward, such as developing a consistent recording and oversight of safeguarding and establishing some standardised models of reporting. The more complex areas, such as approaches to teaching, learning and assessment will be unpicked in Year 2. This has a lot to do with our context; generally our schools are performing well above national standards, and as such they're getting lots right, so in my view it would be wrong to "throw out the baby with the bathwater."

Have you made any changes that have been met with resistance from Headteachers?

There has been no overt resistance but standardising the trust's approach to assessment has unnerved Heads. Previously, there had been no centralised approach to assessment, nor a standardised way of analysing centrally. The majority of schools were using a system developed by the Local Authority which they were happy with, but didn't give me and my team MAT-level information.

This has been difficult to tackle because largely schools have been happy with the way they were managing assessment and the timing of introducing a new approach was critical, we didn't want to change things mid-year. One of the challenges is balancing the frustration of not having things as I want them immediately but remembering what it's like being on the front line as a Headteacher.

How have you found working with schools that were previously quite autonomous?

One of the things we've worked hard on this year is having honest, transparent conversations about things that have to change. It's been important to make clear that the Multi-Academy Trust model is here to stay and that there are benefits of working collaboratively. I totally understand the frustrations for Headteachers at times; they want to do things "their way", and I would have been one of them! My job is to sell the "why" – the rationale behind the change. In my experience, if people understand the "why", they often embrace the change, or at the very least accept it! I'm not opposed to professional dissent and discussion, it's healthy to have challenge and debate, and often it helps us find more effective solutions.

Has having high levels of school autonomy worked for or against you during Covid-19?

We've tried to take the positives from the pandemic. I've been fortunate that the schools have welcomed me as someone trying to facilitate us functioning more effectively as a MAT. Covid-19 has actually underlined the importance of collegiality and collaboration. I hope that Heads have been able to see the benefit of having a Central Team, as well as each other. They've engaged proactively in weekly briefings, trust guidance, risk assessments and making plans for schools. Being a Head is a tough job and can feel very lonely; everyone is always looking to you for the answers and support so hopefully being part of a MAT has helped over the past few months.

Have you used Covid-19 as a "forcing function" to push through any change at the trust?

What it did help instil was a sense of where accountability lies between schools and the trust. Previously, schools and Governors were quite dependent on the Local Authority, whereas this crisis has made clear where school Heads sit within the structure of accountability, as well as the roles of Directors and the MAT team.

How did you roll out a change in Management Information System (MIS) across your trust? What were your motivations to switch?

My function as a CEO is to facilitate Headteachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A key part of that is removing any blockers that stop them achieving that, such as making sure they're using reliable systems that make their work easier.

Before moving to Arbor, the schools didn't have standardised systems that communicated with each other. They were all using SIMS which didn't give me the overview I needed as a CEO. When I first asked questions to my Central Admin Officer like "How many staff do we have? How many disadvantaged children do we have?" she had to ring up every school to get those answers. I wanted to be able to have the information I needed at my fingertips without having to pester busy school Admin Staff.

After a few demonstrations of Arbor, I was confident it was the right solution. The timing was fortunate because our existing network, being provided by the LA, was being withdrawn, and with it SIMS support, making the move to Arbor a real positive. The Arbor migration itself was a really smooth process, with lots of support and guidance from the Arbor team which has really helped the transition.

What are some of the lessons you've learned about change management?

People have got to know the "why" – the rationale behind the change and the benefits to staff. You've also got to acknowledge that it might be a difficult transition. You've got to be able to convince your key users – for example Admin Staff – that the new system is a better model for doing their work. Once you convince them, then they become the drivers of change. As CEO, I believe you should also remind yourself what it's like to be in the position of your Headteachers.

How have you brought in urgent change during the pandemic?

You've got to strike the balance between responding to the daily crises of the pandemic and refocusing people on your overarching goals. In a situation like Covid-19, the waters become muddied and it's easy to lose focus on long-term goals of school improvement when there are daily logistical challenges such as managing social distancing and handwashing. My role is to bring the focus back to "core business".

As CEO you have to be a skilled communicator and judge how you're communicating messages, particularly when they're difficult and uncomfortable. You've got to be intuitive and empathetic; know when to push and when to pull back. I'm not saying I always get this right!

How have you grown and changed as a CEO over the past year?

I never thought I'd be doing this job! I originally trained as a nurse and then retrained to be a teacher in my 30s. I loved being in a classroom and still do. I had no intention of doing anything else, but I gradually took on more leadership responsibility and enjoyed increasing my sphere of influence and eventually became a Headteacher.

Throughout my journey, there have been many highs and I have been lucky to work with so many amazing people. There have also been some really tough times. Throughout all of them I am proud that I have stayed true to my core philosophy of being authentic, values-driven and focused on people. In this role I apply many of the same skills, but I just look now through a slightly scaled-up lens.

I love working with other Senior Leaders, I've also learnt that there is more than just "one way". Sometimes this means I have to keep my emotional responses in check and ensure I am discerning in how I react.

Does your relationship-driven leadership style work only for more autonomous trusts?

I think that regardless of the level of autonomy of a trust, relationships are key to success.

About the author

Kate Davies was appointed CEO at White Woods Primary Academy Trust in July 2019. She has worked across all phases in education, serving as a Headteacher for 15 years and working as a National Leader of Education.

How do you manage a geographically dispersed trust?

By Mark Greatrex, CEO at Bellevue Place Education Trust

Mark's interview took place on 27th March 2020

Why is educational autonomy important for your trust?

We're very passionate about the breadth of provision we offer. We want the children to leave having real independence and confidence. Not only is the curriculum broad, but it's delivered in an exciting, engaging and purposeful way.

> **Educational autonomy can deliver high standards in schools across a geographical spread of schools**

The most important thing for us is educational autonomy. We create the culture of the organisation centrally, and do have some policies that are approved centrally, such as safeguarding, first aid, health & safety and HR. But all our educational policies are approved at a local level.

In the autonomy model, the role of the Headteacher is key. I've wanted to make sure that they have full ownership of everything that goes on in the institution they lead. It's the Middle Leaders and the Teachers too, who are the engine room of the school. They own the curriculum content and the delivery of it. Because we serve schools across a diverse group of affluent and not so affluent areas, the curriculum needs to meet the needs of the local community that we serve.

How do you build successful Headteachers?

The first thing I did as the CEO was put a very strong Headteacher performance management policy in place so that I can properly hold them to account, and that the metrics are shared and understood across the organisation. If we are pushing accountability, we need to reward them. Our Headteachers are eligible for discretionary bonuses every year of 2-8%.

Headteacher objectives and targets are linked to our trust goals: Learn, Enjoy, Succeed:

- **Learn:** This curriculum objective is judged by the breadth of the curriculum and the richness of after-school provision. An example of a target within that is 60% of children attending an after-school club once a week

- **Enjoy:** This measures the effectiveness of the school and is judged by pupil numbers and attendance

- **Succeed:** This measures the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are graded by "Outstanding", "Good", "Requires Improvement" and "Inadequate" (all of our Teachers are "Good", and about 40% are "Outstanding"). We also look at pupil achievement here

- **Corporate target:** This looks at what the Headteacher is doing across the organisation. Do they lead initiatives like learning reviews, collaboration groups, art projects or sports initiatives?

How do you monitor school autonomy?

We make five two-day visits a year to review each of our schools. In the visits, we look at the school development plan and the safeguarding audit. The essential element is the learning review where we look at a particular piece of teaching and learning.

Our review cycle is modelled on "C.O.D.E." (Challenge, Ownership, Dialogue and Engagement). Each school chooses one area to be reviewed on each year. For example, under "Ownership", we review children's engagement in their own learning. This drives a powerful teaching and learning conversation within our schools. I wouldn't recommend doing the whole Ofsted review cycle, because if the Central Team has got leadership right, and we've got teaching and learning right in schools, everything else will fall into place.

Systems like Arbor MIS and Civica (our finance system) are invaluable to us as a Multi-Academy Trust, as they make those conversations a lot more focused. Five years ago, when I was going into schools with school improvement advisors, we'd spend a whole hour just trying to agree on a figure. Now we can immediately identify where the challenges are, for example persistent absences or behavioural issues. Arbor and Civia take us to the right places to focus our discussions and move the schools forward at pace.

How do you roll out your school improvement strategy?

As part of our school improvement strategy, we produce performance reports every term that are similar to the "school on a page" reports that some trusts use. These are two-page reports with RAG ratings covering attainment, quality of teaching and learning, leadership, attendance, safeguarding, behaviour, resources, staffing and engagement with the community. These consistent documents share the dialogue and increase visibility and accountability, bringing everyone into the conversation of improvement.

As a Central Team, we then plan strategic improvement interventions. As David Blunkett said "Intervention should be in inverse proportion to success." We believe the system is improved by working on our worst performing schools.

Depending on internal capacity, we sometimes commission organisations such as Local Authorities or expert private providers to do a piece of work with a clear scope e.g. improve attendance in one of our schools.

How do you develop your staff?

We're lucky to have an "Enrichment fund" which we use for certain passion projects across our schools, such as "Philosophy for Children" staff training, or hiring a Maths advisor five days a year for each school.

Our CPD offer is critical. We've developed new Headship, Senior and Emerging Leaders programmes. We run one trust-wide INSET day a year in one of our schools, with about fifty one-hour taster sessions in different areas e.g. having courageous conversations with parents. These really drive enthusiasm and give staff tools and techniques they can take back to their schools. They're also aimed at continuing to fire their enthusiasm for teaching and learning.

We also make sure we do safeguarding every year for new staff or those who need a refresher. It's possible to do things centrally but you can't do it as often and you need to use remote formats. Going forward, we plan to do four out of five of our collaboration sessions per year virtually.

Why is financial alignment important to your trust?

Where we give our schools educational autonomy, the opposite is true in terms of how we're structured financially. By managing finances centrally, I want to invest funds in the schools that need it the most. That's not to say we pool school funding. Each school retains their budgets based on the school funding letter.

We've set three key financial performance indicators:

1 No school will go into deficit. Those who are in deficit have a goal to be out by the end of the year

2 Staffing should be no greater than 75% of each school's budget. This has allowed us to prioritise our numbers of staff

3 95% of invoices should have a purchase order. We want to ensure a formalised process where all committed spend at school level is raised in our finance system (Civica) as a purchase order. We then process all invoices centrally in weekly payment run across all

What are your top tips for managing finances across your schools?

- **Give Headteachers access to cash.** Our Heads have a procurement card with a monthly limit of £3,000. This means they can buy supplies for breakfast clubs, make small purchases from Amazon etc. However, they don't have bank accounts

- **Only have one bank account.** If you have more than one account, ask yourself why? Why move money? It's too much of a risk

- **Have one provider instead of multiple.** We have one payroll provider so everything is in one place when we need to do things like gender pay gap reporting. We also have only one catering provider and one ICT provider, and we're moving towards having one facilities management provider

- **Go cashless.** We use Arbor for meals and trips. We also use SchoolsBuddy for our schools who run lots of clubs, because it can rank clubs

- **Think about your pension options.** Because we're based in London and our Teachers have large student loans, we offer a third pension option alongside LGPS and TPS, which has a 0% employee contribution for Teachers and 2% for Support Staff, and we pay an 8% employer contribution

- **Have a separate internal auditor** so you know what you need to know and the external audit isn't a surprise

- **Hire more efficiently.** Some MATs have a Business Manager per school being paid highly for a mostly administrational role which only requires a small amount of financial expertise. At BPET, we have one central Finance Director who has complete control of the finances, and school Office Managers to do the admin work. This saves us around £5-10,000 per school which goes towards supporting the schools. It also gives me visibility of finances across our organisation, and means we can react very quickly to the needs of schools

- **Procure large spend centrally.** We procure any expenditure over £20,000 centrally, such as staff appointments. This means we can look at our spend across the whole trust. We work with Schools Buying Club who tender our contracts for us and hold them to account, which helps make sure we get real value for money across our contracts

Is distance between schools in a trust a barrier?

Since 2011, the MAT market has been growing and evolving exponentially. The question of proximity was only really brought up by Lord Nash when he recommended an hour's journey time between schools. Hopefully the way we support our schools will give confidence that distance doesn't have to be a barrier, but we take responsibility for our growth, not only in numbers, but in geography, and work hard to make sure we don't have any true outliers.

Do you plan to grow? What is your expansion model?

A management consultant once introduced to me the rule of "10, 40 100." If you think of these proportions applied to an organisation – it could be the number of employees, or the turnover – organisations with 10, 40 and 100 need to be run in very different ways and probably need very different CEOs. In our case, we think of this in terms of number of schools. Our aim is to grow to 15 schools, but if we're successful at 15 and the trustees want us to grow to 40, that will be a very different business model.

However, where operational alignment works well for 15 schools, the question is, is it scalable within the 10, 40, 100 rule? I don't know. If we grow, Regional Directors and hubs might be an option. We could also split the Finance Director role into four hubs. What we'd have to think about, however, is how we'd bring those hubs together to maintain consistency.

How have you adapted to managing your schools remotely?

Over the past few weeks we've been thrown into web calls; we use Zoom for all of our conversations with Headteachers. Normally, having a meeting with a school can take two hours out of everyone's time, so doing them virtually is really powerful. I think having a blend of the Internet and meeting in person is important – Zoom is something the finance and operations teams use quite a lot anyway, and have been for a few years now. But you can't deny the power of personal contact. I think we'll always continue our physical meetings with Headteachers four times a year.

About the author

Mark Greatrex is the CEO at Bellevue Place Education Trust (BPET), where he's been for five years. BPET is geographically spread out, made up of eight primary schools in eight different Local Authority regions across London and Berkshire. Previously in his career, Mark has held senior positions in three academy trusts and served for 10 years at the DfE.

How to nurture staff wellbeing and mental health across a trust

Dan Morrow, CEO at Woodland Academy Trust

Dan's interview took place on 27th March 2020

A human approach to leadership

The philosophy that guides Dan's strategy is that "wellbeing isn't something you can just tack on – it needs to be based in culture and action". Since arriving at Woodland Academy Trust, a trust of four primary schools in North Kent, Dan has brought wellbeing and mental health onto the agenda, replacing the previous "compliance mindset" which he says did not treat staff "as people first".

He's introduced initiatives such as wellbeing dogs, paid wellbeing days and CPD pathways staff can shape themselves, which have turned around the trust's previously high level of staff absence, sickness and turnover rate. They've achieved this, Dan explains, by shaping wellbeing policies around their staff – which makes them feel heard and creates a reciprocal culture where "people want to get out of bed and come to work every day."

In times of crisis, recognise your staff's realities

The last few weeks have proven to Dan that the most important thing for his employees is their families and home life. As a leader, he believes you have to work your decisions around the reality of people's lives. "It's important we understand that sometimes life happens", Dan says. With this in mind, the trust has re-examined their bank of policies to make them family-friendly and focused on workload. Making these adjustments has cut down on the number of staff calling in sick because of dependency issues or an issue that would have previously forced them to take unpaid leave.

In shaping wellbeing policies across the whole trust, Dan sent out surveys to his staff to make sure they were on board with everything he was proposing. "The worst thing you can do in wellbeing" according to Dan, "is to announce a strategy which you're effectively doing *to* your staff and they may not actually want." The surveys helped Dan's team understand what would really make a difference to staff. For example, they had proposed wellbeing workshops but staff said the most valuable thing for them was more time. Dan's team took this and introduced the idea of paid wellbeing days which staff can use for something that's important to them, whether that's to "attend weddings, the first day of their children's school or a spa day with a friend they hadn't seen for 30 years. Why not?"

Give staff a voice

An essential part of Dan's leadership strategy is listening to his staff. When he started as CEO, he met with every member of staff to get to know them as individuals, ask them how they were and what they needed. The aim of these conversations was to build the relationship on "a shared sense of culture and vision". In a trust the size of Woodland, it was possible (and important to Dan) for the Executive Team to hold these conversations, but for larger trusts Dan suggests this may be done on a Division or Director basis. Dan plans to check in with staff in this way again when schools return after the Coronavirus crisis.

> **Being part of a broader narrative of education has been really important for colleagues to find their place within our sector**

Woodland's people-first approach extends to staff development, where Dan ensures that initiatives are geared towards what staff actually need and want to work on. Staff can now create their own CPD pathways and take secondments or work experience opportunities, which gives them "a voice in where their development is going." Staff are also encouraged to take part in networking and to be active in discussions within the education sector on social media. Three out of four of Woodland staff are now involved in Twitter or LinkedIn which, Dan says, demonstrates how staff feel more ownership over their career.

Prioritise mental health

As part of the overall strategy at Woodland "WAT CAIRS" (Woodland Academy Trust Care, Aspiration, Inspiration, Respect and Stewardship), they believe that leadership should be "part of the solution to problems" that staff face in their lives. For this reason, a free employee counselling service is available for staff, which has been particularly useful during the difficult few weeks since the Covid-19 outbreak. They also run a Wellbeing Dogs scheme, which has been incredibly popular, both with children and staff. Initiatives like these are relatively cheap and help to "lift the spirits and make it feel like work has an aspect of care to it."

And those costs have paid off. Staff retention has risen to over 95%, saving over £300,000 in recruitment costs over three years. Days lost to sickness has reduced significantly, too, falling from 11% in 2015-16 to 3.1% last year, which has cut the need for external cover.

Check in with staff during Covid-19

As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, Woodland Academy Trust has taken many lessons which will inform their wellbeing policy going forward. In this challenging time full of anxiety, Dan's attitude is "it's incumbent on us leaders now to ensure that staff understand that their wellbeing is being prioritised." One of the immediate practical measures he took to put anxiety to rest was to reassure his staff around pay. Communication was also key – teams are encouraged to check in with each other regularly and new protocols and practices have been produced so everyone is comfortable working remotely. They've also provided close support for the more vulnerable members of staff.

Dan predicts that following this crisis, wellbeing and mental health are going to be higher on the agenda so leaders should "ensure staff have the professional capabilities, the personal resilience and the team around them to be successful.

About the author

Dan Morrow is the CEO at Woodland Academy Trust, a primary school trust of four schools in Bexley, London. He has led the trust for two and a half years.

Dan has a proven track record in school improvement and strategic leadership and systems leadership are his passion. His own leadership journey has seen him lead at a senior level in an all-through, a secondary and, prior to his appointment to Woodland Academy Trust, a primary school. His main learning has been that leadership vision, values and behaviours are more crucial than context in securing rapid and sustained progress.

How to look after your most vulnerable students, during and after Covid-19

By Angela Ransby, CEO at The Raedwald Trust, an Alternative Provision trust
Angela's interview took place on 10th July 2020

How has lockdown affected children with complex social, mental health and behavioural needs?

It has had a catastrophic effect on the day-to-day lived experience of these children. It's already extremely challenging for children in our education system who need extra support to succeed, and Covid-19 has exposed some uncomfortable truths around how the system has fractured, allowing these children to be excluded. The crisis has enabled very strong conversations to happen across the education landscape to make sure that that doesn't continue in future.

What roles do mainstream schools have in supporting vulnerable students at this difficult time?

I feel very strongly that any work done should be built on the premise that children are not vulnerable, they are made vulnerable by systems, processes or their external environment. The perception of Alternative Provision (AP) has been transformed recently from a controversial system, to one that can support children to be integrated into mainstream education. There is an appetite within AP and DfE policy to view AP as an increased service to schools which I believe it should be. Covid-19 has allowed this to happen even more strongly.

If you approach it from this point of view, the question is how mainstream education can work together with AP to protect these children. The close interaction of mainstream schools and AP can enable mainstream schools to care more for their community, including accommodating – and celebrating – children who are presenting "challenges".

What initiatives have you put in place during lockdown and what have you learned that you'll take forward?

Emergencies always galvinise really strong solutions. On 23rd March we closed for a day and reopened on 24th under a "safe-haven" model. This involved a reorganisation of our daily systems and routines to make sure we met the needs of children who were made additionally vulnerable as a result of Covid-19.

We arranged to see our children at least once a week, and our most vulnerable children daily. We also introduced by the end of that week "the community shelf" which remains our storeroom we share with a local mainstream academy trust containing emergency supplies, educational resources, plus food and equipment for vulnerable families.

This partnership with the local trust was important as it allowed us to pool our resources, make decisions together and look after not only our children more confidently but also extend our impact to 200 children from their school as well. It was more difficult for them as a larger school to pivot and flex their strategies so quickly, so we were able to support them in that. We also jointly fundraised to ensure that vulnerable cohorts in both our schools would receive digital devices so they could access remote learning. This partnership will help us going forward to respond together to what happens next.

What advice do you have for schools who are struggling to reach out to their vulnerable students?

We deployed all our staff into "nomadic" roles – each receiving a case list of students. We're used to providing community work and home support in the normal course of events, so we were comfortable door stopping every child. We did this once a week for those we determined as "safer" at home, and daily for those more at risk. These face-to-face conversations were vital in making sure we could give support where it was required.

What should schools avoid when supporting vulnerable students?

There is an increased focus on how we are going to teach, not what we are going to teach. For our vulnerable students, the "how" is easy – we know that the only way they will engage is through a trusted relationship which has a degree of intimacy. In mainstream schools, we fear we may be seeing a focus on assessments and core subjects as part of the "recovery curriculum", but this is problematic because it does not acknowledge the deep trauma of Covid-19 on children who have been made vulnerable.

Access to technology is both a barrier and a blocker. How do you level the playing field and support students remotely?

The intimacy of the relationship is crucial. There's no way round the hours of time schools need to spend to support families and understand what the barriers are to children engaging and participating in education.

The digital divide is a problem in terms of equipment within the house, sense of entitlement, participation, but it's not an issue in terms of accessing learning. There really shouldn't be any reason why many trusts cannot equip children with technology at home in an emergency, especially when you see such large cash reserves and salaries of executive leaders.

Collaboration between AP and mainstream can work here too for children on dual roll. Although too simplistic, in essence, mainstream might provide the "what" – the strength, rigor and quality of curriculum – and AP can deliver the "how". AP and mainstream will improve at the same rate when they hold each other to account.

> " **The "recovery curriculum" is problematic because it does not acknowledge the deep trauma of Covid-19 on children who have been made vulnerable** "

How are you going to be assessing Teachers next year on teaching and learning?

We won't. We delivered a professional development programme last year which removed all the concepts of appraisals based on bound targets and replaced them with an obligation to improve and hone your craft. Though our curriculum has very specific, standardised milestones for assessment, if Teachers fall short of delivering on these, we manage this under daily policies, rather than under a performance management policy. This reinforces the importance of the impact Teachers have on children and our philosophy that every moment with children should be positive and impact learning.

How does that give you the evidence to show that your Teachers are performing?

I don't think we have to evidence that. This culture of assessing Teachers was created by a system that didn't require it. It was about School Leaders and structures being confident they were able to defend pay awards – it was a system born out of the allusion of accountability and I don't think Ofsted or anyone else ever asked for it. It generates fear and compartmentalises the impact of an individual member of staff from their ability to feed into a community.

How can mainstream schools use this situation as an opportunity to extend and improve their care for vulnerable students?

Schools should look carefully at the dual placement arrangements they have for children sitting in AP. If they're in a region which uses a binary system – either the child is in AP or they're not – they should ask where the responsibility lies and work with their AP to generate new ways of working. If they're in an area where there isn't the best AP, they should contact national associations like PRUsAP (President, Sarah Dove) or the AP CEO Network (the Chair of which is Mark Vickers, CEO at Olive Academies Multi Academy Trust).

About the author

Angela Ransby is the CEO at The Raedwald Trust. She is a trained secondary school Teacher and has worked both in mainstream, AP and hospital education, nationally and in international development. The Raedwald Trust is a Multi-Academy Trust of six AP URNs for KS1 through to KS4 children with behavioural issues and special medical needs. The Raedwald Trust also operates an outreach service.

Don't compromise on quality - how to make online education successful

Jonathan Bishop, CEO and Executive Headteacher at Cornerstone Academy Trust

Jonathan's interview took place on 15th May 2020

Establishing a virtual school offer

When they closed their sites in March, Cornerstone aspired to run a virtual schooling programme that would emulate a full school day. Wanting not to sacrifice the quality of education, they created a structured school day with breadth and depth of format and content, and lots of support for students and staff.

Combatting the digital divide

One of the first steps the trust took was to ensure all students had access to devices at home. From a village school outside Exeter, to a new school serving a new housing estate, to a coastal town with 60% of families on income support, Cornerstone's three schools serve a range of students from different demographic contexts and levels of deprivation, so it was important they levelled the playing field with equal access to technology.

Choosing the right digital platform

Transitioning into lockdown was straightforward for Cornerstone, since they'd been investing in and using digital technologies successfully for several years. Many classes already had 1:1 access to Microsoft Surface devices in the classroom and were used to using Office 365, Teams and OneNote in lessons. Teachers also regularly collaborated in a digital way to plan the curriculum resources.

Using a Microsoft Teams channel for each class, Teachers were already used to weaving in digital activities, such as videos, quizzes and a moderated live chat into lessons. Students would use the channel as a virtual exercise book during class, using digital pens to write responses and share them with the class. They would also use Microsoft Teams for 1:1 mentoring sessions which allowed mentors to share notes after each session and set the targets for the students.

Concerns around live streaming

At first, the trust's goal of a full day of live lessons was met with mixed opinions. Some staff worried that imposing a "high-stakes" schooling system on students' home environment could cause unwanted anxiety and stress. Some thought a full programme from 9am - 3.30pm was too intense for families to cope with during such a difficult time. Some unions were also voicing concerns at the time that live lessons raised safeguarding issues both for students and staff, as well as posing a risk to their mental health.

However, Jonathan and his team were confident that live lessons would be really valuable. And this began to prove itself – Teachers told him in a survey that they really enjoyed the live emotional interaction with students, since missing their classes was one of the most difficult aspects of lockdown for them. The trust also ensured all staff were upskilled in using digital tools, had continued CPD on managing behaviour in the virtual classroom, and had support when they needed it.

Parents too shared that they really valued the continued engagement and contact with Teachers. Some students who weren't as keen on live lessons said they preferred the pre-recorded sessions that they could catch up on. Jonathan says this may have also been due to slow broadband speed or personal circumstances for some.

The right format for the right session

Microsoft Teams gave Cornerstone lots of options for "event" format, allowing them to run different types of remote session which were appropriate for certain groups or purposes. They could decide whether to allow one-way or two-way interaction – either enabling or disabling microphone, camera, chat and screen-sharing. They could pre-record sessions or run them live. It was also easy to set up "presenter" and "delegate" permissions to make sure staff could moderate the sessions and control who could speak when.

Throughout lockdown, this allowed them to stream lessons, whole-school assemblies, and private 1:1 mentoring sessions. Some sessions were opened up to students or parents who could put their "hand up" and ask questions live. They set up a whole-school Teams channel which served as a virtual noticeboard, allowing dialogue between all staff and students. Each week, parents also received their child's timetable with embedded links to all sessions.

It allowed for creativity too. Jonathan led a weekly cooking class for students, parents and siblings which brought a real sense of community to lockdown, and a fun way for him to remind everyone of the importance of things like handwashing. They also ran a daily storytime with Teachers sharing the story on screen so students could follow along.

Keeping track of safeguarding

Being used to technology in the classroom well before lockdown, Cornerstone was already using tools to manage safeguarding issues related to students' activity on devices. Keystroke software allows them to monitor what students type in virtual chat dialogues and flags anything concerning to the Teacher. If it's particularly serious, Keystroke's dedicated call centre contacts SLT.

Whilst students were learning from home, however, they needed a more sophisticated safeguarding system. They set up an internal safeguarding team to deal with any concerns Teachers raised via CPOMS. The team would collect evidence and contact families where necessary. They also recorded every remote lesson, which allowed SLT to monitor and reflect on what was working and what could be improved to help students engage more at home.

Practising e-safety has also been an important part of delivering remote lessons. Jonathan and his team ran a parent training course, with a home learning website and workshops which gave them tips for creating a safe home learning environment. Tips included not allowing children to take their devices around the house or to their bedroom, maintaining clear hours of the school day, and setting up an area where they could supervise their children whilst they worked. They also reassured parents that each student device had tracking software on it, and gave them materials from ThinkuKnow for children to learn about staying safe online too.

Throughout lockdown, Jonathan and his team were continually reflecting on how to refine and improve remote learning. One useful method was having colleagues join each others' lessons to give constructive suggestions and ideas. This also served as a useful safeguarding process, allowing staff to support each other to help students engage.

About the author

Jonathan Bishop is the CEO at the Cornerstone Academy Trust, incorporating the outstanding schools. Broadclyst Community Primary School and Westclyst Community Primary School. He was instrumental in achieving the first Academy status for a Devon primary school, Broadclyst Primary School, in 2010.

He is a Microsoft Innovative Educator who has pioneered the use of digital technologies in the classroom for many years. He is a National Leader of Education, DfE Education Advisor, Devon Association of Primary Headteachers Executive Member and a Director of the Devon Schools Leadership Services, providing him with the opportunity to influence educational policy across Devon.

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