

The Great School Framework

Inspirational Leadership in Lockdown

Case study - Haywood Grove's response to the covid 19 pandemic

Haywood Grove is a special school for primary pupils

www.haywoodgrove.co.uk

More than anything, at the outset of the pandemic we were determined to continue serving our community in the best way that we could. We hoped, as specialist provision for children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, that we would be able to use our strengths, our expertise and our understanding, within the context of our school values, to navigate our way through what is an acute emotional and psychologically traumatic event.

We place a high importance on building relationships and how these can be significant in minimising the negative impact of trauma and so we set about ensuring that, despite unusual and adverse conditions, we could continue to cultivate a sense of togetherness and connection.

We recognised that there would be a direct correlation between the provision of effective support for staff and their subsequent capacity to meet our ambition to prioritise our children and their families' psychological well-being.

We knew that it would be crucial to pay careful attention to the emotions of other members of our community and anticipated that, over time, it would be likely that some, if not all, would struggle with a range of distressing emotions that we committed to view as normal reactions to an abnormal event.

As the pandemic gained momentum, there was a growing feeling of insecurity, uncertainty and threat within our community. We worried that this could lead to feelings of helplessness, disconnection and a reduction in trust. We wanted to address this quickly and directly and undertook to provide support in such a way that these feelings were replaced with a better sense of safety, control, connection and hope.

To do this we pledged to focus on safety, well-being and livelihood and gave this message openly and explicitly, to all colleagues: those starting with us, those leaving us, those able to come into school and those not able to do so.

We pledged to provide routine and predictability, to explain our decisions and to seek the views of those who might be impacted by them directly.

We started by ensuring that those supply staff who were working effectively with us were given contracts.

As leaders, we wanted to ensure that we could continue to be visible and available to maintain a 'virtual' open-door and so, very early on, we established a 'virtual' staff room' on WhatsApp. This has proved to be invaluable for the sharing of information (personal and professional) and has been helpful in ensuring that those staff who are leaving and those who are new or returning have been able to feel an initial, renewed or continued sense of connection. We have shared jokes, successes,

worries, quizzes, information, resources and ideas in equal measure and, where possible, have ensured an emotional climate that has allowed for and encouraged the expression of positive emotions such as pride, determination and optimism.

As much as we valued the input of colleagues through the use of this forum, we were also mindful of those who preferred not to contribute in this way and ensured that we noticed those who weren't 'present', providing alternative and individual methods of contact and checking in, looking out for any indicators of low mood or isolation. We re-distributed information about our school's well-being schemes and re-introduced our confidential in-house well-being support via our Parent Engagement Officer, who supports colleagues to talk through issues (either personal or professional) that might impact on their ability to undertake their work.

Because we wanted to understand how colleagues were feeling and therefore what we could do to support them to feel safe, comfortable and confident to come to work, we devised a survey to seek their views, with this aspiration expressed explicitly. All members of staff completed the survey and were open and honest about their needs and vulnerabilities and those of their families, as well as offering ideas and solutions to complex challenges associated with our sector.

As a result, we devised a Staff Vulnerability Indicator, and by using this were able to determine the work that each person could do comfortably. We developed flexible working schedules, for example providing new staff with mentoring support and opportunities to shadow, and revised roles and re-deployment for those unable to come into school so that they could continue to contribute and feel valued, valuable and productive. We incorporated additional breaks into each schedule and planned carefully to reduce stress and demand and to incorporate variety and a balance between higher and lower stress activity.

We wanted to ensure that colleagues' workloads were realistic and manageable and that tasks undertaken were varied and stimulating. As part of each individual schedule, staff were offered bespoke opportunities for on-line learning (according to interest and need) that for some consolidated previous complex neuro-scientific and psychological learning and for others provided aspects of induction or re-familiarisation with supporting the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.

We have found that these activities helped colleagues to both connect with each other through shared professional experiences and to maintain links with the school whilst working in isolation.

As leaders we chose to trust our colleagues without excess monitoring, rather than engage in micro-management of a situation beyond our control from a distance. We focused on providing staff with daily and repeated positive relational experiences and a forum to talk in confidence about feelings and stress triggers.

Feedback to leaders from staff has been, without exception, positive, with individual staff going out of their way to comment and express thanks that has been both supportive and reassuring. More importantly than this, and crucially, staff have shown a willingness and a resilience that would have been difficult to imagine. They have shown a consistent unconditional positive regard for all of our children and families and have built and maintained relationships in a way that we could not have anticipated, transforming a time of crisis into one of opportunity and hope as we move towards full-opening in September.

In normal times our children experience a significantly heavy stress load and so we knew that many would find tolerating additional change, disruption and uncertainty particularly difficult to bear. We anticipated that their relationships with their parents, carers and siblings may also be impacted due

to the additional pressures and tensions faced by families. We therefore set about developing ways of working with them that would help to alleviate some of these additional pressures.

In the first instance, we talked to our parents and carers individually, establishing the needs, concerns and vulnerabilities that existed within their households. These conversations were formalised and, in the same way that we sought the views of staff, we surveyed their opinions and sought information through the use of a questionnaire, in order that we could provide sensitive responses to personal circumstances and deliver bespoke intervention in the form of practical aid and other ways to support positive mental health. In turn, we developed a Vulnerability Indicator for children and families that was based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Need, the Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire and the Social Care Assessment Framework Triangle. We then used and continue to use this as a framework for monitoring and responding to on-going and changing support needs, including those of a safeguarding nature.

As soon as we knew that we were not going to be seeing our children and families with the same frequency or in the same way for an indefinite period, we set about adapting our practises and sharing our intentions with our parents and carers. We knew that we would need to manage expectations, with some families wanting full-time provision and others being reluctant to return their child to school and so, as we opened more widely, we determined that we would operate a system where we would see as many children as possible in the space of a week. At the time of writing, this equates to 77% of our children, with an additional 3 % unable to attend due to shielding. In the first instance, we decided to scale back the demands that we placed on children whilst in school in order to enhance their well-being. Since this time, we have continued to adjust our expectations and practices to correspond to developmental capabilities, experience of traumatic stress and to develop a readiness for full opening and a return to something that will be reminiscent of normal.

We wrote to parents and carers three times, setting out the process we were undertaking, providing information about the extensive risk assessments undertaken – of individual children, of the environment and of the activities we would offer - in addition to providing each child with a bespoke timetable, blending face-to-face in school and remote learning where possible.

At the outset, we worked in a fast and improvised way, developing a Remote Curriculum that, as far as possible, replicated our in-school offer. We recognised that our parent/carer views might change over time and also that some may find the prospect of virtual face-to-face learning intrusive. As a result, we surveyed our families to get a sense of what they might want and need, offering telephone calls, video calls, letters and post cards home, communication through our home-school link-books, email, the provision of work packs, learning gifts in the post, virtual play/games, play therapy sessions and shared video calls. As we fell into a natural rhythm, we continued to identify what else might be needed and to improve our offer. This meant that we delivered resources to family homes, undertook socially distanced garden visits, provided laptops and dongles for those without equipment or internet and made individually accessible videos for those with more complex and sensory needs who were less able to access our more traditional methods of communication. We found ways of bringing those children into school safely, who would otherwise have had to use public transport.

We also set about going outside our natural comfort zone, making an initial video for our existing children when we first began to operate in a more limited way and, more recently, filming ourselves reading stories for the children. The Remote Curriculum now has its own discrete tab on the school website and we can envisage using this when children are unable to come into school at other times. We continue to think about ways that we can improve it further as a flexible and sustainable additional resource. We were worried that the increase in remote and on-line access might increase

the safeguarding risks for our children and so bought into a specific package that provided internet safety training for all staff that is designed to also be suitable for children and families. We have therefore offered this to ours.

Throughout this period of time we have viewed our work as a period of transition, taking a panoramic view of everything that we have undertaken to do. We have at all times operated in ways that have taken account of the short, medium and longer term, of the present and of the future. As such, we have engaged frequently and extensively with external professionals, particularly in relation to transition. We have made a virtual tour and welcome video for our new children who will arrive in September and undertaken socially distanced visits to the school, in keeping with what we would have done if the pandemic hadn't got in the way. At the time of writing, we are in the middle of organising our transition arrangements for these children, having built capacity into our timetable to ensure that this can happen. We, like every other school, are most worried about the potential for a deterioration in the children's mental health and well-being and a subsequent fear of attending school. We anticipate that this may be particularly magnified for those who have not attended school for some time and who may view their next steps as a leap into the unknown.

We are fortunate to have established a pre-existing structure that allows us to open over the summer holidays to provide mentoring for those who are most in need. This year we intend to continue this programme and to prioritise those who may need to re-build their confidence and establish/re-establish relationships and routines. This is also an opportunity for those staff who are new to the school to continue to receive induction and further opportunities to get to know some of our children, should they so wish to do so prior to September.

We recognise that for many of our families this holiday provision will provide welcome support and respite and an alleviation of some of the feelings associated with isolation. We have identified that financial hardship has become a steadily growing concern and so have set up a Food and Hygiene bank so that we can ease some of this pressure.

This period of time has undoubtedly been very mentally taxing. Almost every member of the community has been impacted, whether this be through illness or bereavement, worries about children (their own or others), financial hardship or fatigue associated with anxiety or change. Communication has been slower, more complicated and protracted. At times it has been unbelievably frustrating.

But, we are okay. This situation has given us the chance to get to know each other better, to get to know the children better on an individual basis, and if it wasn't there already in bucket loads, given us a meaning and a purpose for the work that we do. Never has there been a time when we can better prove that to attend to peoples' social and emotional needs is crucial to providing a foundation for fostering creativity, innovation and talent in all members of the community. We have been pushed to give more ownership and trust to our colleagues and in turn have discovered gifts and capabilities that we didn't know were there. The warmth and unconditional positive regard shown to the children and each other has been remarkable. There have been lots of tears and lots of laughter.

We have been continually learning, about ourselves and our community and we have a hope that we can take what we have learned through this experience, the good and the bad, to continue to do the very best for our children.