

United Learning

Background

United Learning is a large group of schools with over 80 primary and secondary schools across the UK, predominately academy schools and a smaller number of independent schools.

Part-time rates for teachers across the trust are similar to national averages, but vary greatly from school to school, with some schools taking a more proactive approach than others.

Challenge

United Learning's leadership sees a role for their trust in addressing recruitment and retention challenges. They are specifically working to attract and keep high quality teachers, as well as increase numbers of teachers in subjects where graduates are in high demand.

Additionally, the trust is keen to ensure that it is an inclusive employer with a diverse employee body, a minimal gender pay gap and a set of working practices which work for all.

In 2018, the trust's leaders carried out a strategic planning exercise which identified that flexible working could address both these issues. As a result, they sought to improve the understanding and implementation of flexible working across the trust, through a 2-stage project.

Process

Stage 1

From the end of 2018 to spring 2019, the trust carried out a review of policies and guidance related to flexible working across the group.

This included:

- rewriting the trust's flexible working policy, highlighting the role of informal dialogue and proactive leadership to inform decisions and move away from a request-response model
- new tools and guidance for leaders and staff on how to plan and discuss flexible working options
- training for the HR team, carried out by Timewise, providing the skills needed to support and drive conversations about flexible working
- sharing of best practice across the trust, including video case studies from headteachers with a good record for enabling flexible working, and a discussion led by a school with a high proportion of flexibly-employed staff

Stage 2

Starting in October 2019, United Learning launched a research project with 7 volunteer schools which demonstrated positive attitudes towards flexible working.

This included:

- an introductory meeting to bring the schools' leaders and HR teams together, encouraging inter-school dialogue and sharing of best practice
- training and workshops for headteachers, delivered by Timewise, including a focus on the role of job design and how to use it successfully
- in-depth training on adapting the timetabling process to incorporate flexible working, including a practical 'how to' session delivered by a school which excels in this area

Progress was then reviewed and priorities set for the next steps in January 2020.

Areas for further exploration included:

- building flexible working into recruitment plans
- creating a more systematic approach to staff consultation
- exploring how to consolidate planning, preparation and assessment time to allow remote working
- scheduling of meetings and pastoral time to support staggered start and finish times.

Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19)

The COVID-19 pandemic began midway through stage 2. The unexpected challenge of providing distanced teaching and learning for pupils put some of United Learning's plans on hold.

However, the move to remote education for many pupils also created an opportunity for schools to explore the techniques and technology required to make remote schooling – and remote working – work. The experience also removed some of the perceived barriers, and highlighted other possibilities, such as using IT to allow remote access to team meetings.

United Learning and its member schools will be incorporating what they have learned into their post-COVID-19 strategic planning.

Examples of good practice in United Learning schools

High Hazels Academy

High Hazels Academy, a primary school in Sheffield, has undergone a transformation as a result of implementing flexible working. With staff

turnover above trust and national averages, the school's leadership team undertook a programme of initiatives, including mentoring, continuing professional development (CPD), succession planning and flexible working.

Having actively engaged with United Learning's guidance on flexible working, and taken part in the training and support they were offered, the school's leaders have been able to increase opportunities for flexible working across all staff groups.

They are now taking an even more proactive step by recruiting new staff on a flexible basis. This, in turn, has increased the school's diversity and improved the inclusion and well-being of staff.

The school's headteacher, Asma Maqsood-Shah, believes that strong communication has been central to the success of their new flexible working strategy. She has built in a system for 2-way feedback around every aspect of the school, so that the senior leadership team can be clear about the impact on staff.

Following the new approach, part-time teacher rates are now higher than the national average and, according to the annual staff survey, engagement has increased from 68% in 2017 to 89% in 2019. Voluntary staff turnover rates have reduced significantly in the same timeframe, dropping from 12.2% to 2.5% in 2019 for Key Stage 1, and from 10.9% to 4.9% for Key Stage 2, and recruitment costs have reduced accordingly.

Only 2 years ago, the school needed to recruit between 6 and 8 teachers a year. In 2020 just 2 new teachers have been needed.

Shoreham Academy

Faced with a high proportion of teaching staff who were approaching retirement, the senior leadership team at Shoreham Academy have taken a proactive approach. They have actively encouraged those who were considering stepping down to opt for phased retirement, which allows them to continue working in a part-time role and draw part of their pension. This has helped the school to retain these teachers' experience and skills, and support their wellbeing, whilst simultaneously reducing budget costs.

Flexible working is now available to all staff, at every level, and the school's leaders are rarely unable to meet a staff member's needs. Part-time teacher rates are above the national average, and informal flexibility is also treated positively, with staff members willing and able to cover for each other when needed.

From September 2020, the school's vice principal will be working 3 days per week, passing on some responsibilities to the assistant principal. This will in turn support the assistant principal's CPD and the school's succession planning.

Guildford High School

Guildford High School's approach is driven by the headteacher's belief that outstanding schools are built on outstanding teachers, and that retaining them is a clear priority. Under her leadership, the timetabling process is not based on part-timers working a specific number of days, but instead on the days they wish to be in school. Their contracts are built around timetabling software. Teachers are given clear expectations about what is possible, so that everyone knows where they stand.

For example, it is understood that part-time core subject teachers will have to be in school across 4 days each week. Teachers in other subjects may be able to consolidate their teaching time together and so have fewer days on site. Additionally, if they are willing to teach a limited number of year groups, they may be able to reduce their role even further. For example, a science teacher was able to create a one-day-per-week pattern by opting to teach only biology to pupils in years 7 to 9.

As a result of this experience in implementing flexible working, as well as a proactive approach to technology, the impact of COVID-19 was less disruptive than it might otherwise have been. The school used Microsoft Teams to deliver remote lessons during lockdown, and was able to support other schools with their virtual provision.

The experience has reaffirmed the headteacher's view that flexibility enables rather than hinders outstanding teaching. She also believes it has opened up more opportunities for flexible working.

Outcome

In addition to the case studies noted above, and despite the impact of COVID-19, United Learning is already seeing a range of benefits from their flexible working project, at a trust-wide level.

Schools with high rates of part-time staff are reporting improved retention of talent and more efficient staffing costs, and the teacher turnover rate is declining across the trust as a whole. The trust's HR business partners also report that the new policy is facilitating more positive and constructive outcomes for flexible working requests across all schools.

High Hazels Academy headteacher Asma Maqsood-Shah says,

Despite previously being anti-flexible working, I am now a passionate advocate. It has made such a difference to retention and morale and, ultimately, to the children.

Additionally, the gender pay gap for United Learning Academy schools is reducing, and analysis by the trust suggests that greater flexible working for school leaders and teachers is a factor. Data from United Learning's Gender Pay Gap Report 2019 suggests that there is a correlation between the

reduction in the pay gap and an increase in flexible working in the workforce overall, for teachers and for women in senior roles.

The trust has put in place a range of mechanisms to continue sharing learnings and good practice, including case studies, a dedicated information area on the intranet, and training for HR business partners and school HR staff. A new recruitment and retention best practice handbook is currently in development.