

Whites Meadow Primary School

Background

White Meadows is a 3-form entry community primary school based in Littlehampton, in one of the most deprived parts of West Sussex. The infant and junior schools were amalgamated in 2011, at which point they were both in special measures. It currently has just under 100 teaching and support staff.

Challenge

While the shortage of teaching staff has been a national issue for many years, recruitment and retention is more difficult for schools in deprived areas. Additionally, a legacy of being in special measures makes the situation more difficult, even when a school is starting to improve. This is a challenge which the leaders at White Meadows have sought to tackle through their flexible working strategy.

Changing the culture

Over the last 8 years, leaders at White Meadows have used flexible working to attract and keep a group of passionate, resilient teachers who relish the challenges of their roles and are prepared to go the extra mile to support their pupils.

The drive for flexible working was initially led by the school's headteacher (now its executive head), who set out to create a culture in which people's lives did not take second place to their jobs. In practice, this meant taking the approach that they would try to accommodate flexible working requests, for whatever reason.

How they fulfilled this promise

Leading from the top

The school's leadership team openly champions flexible working, the current headteacher worked a 4-day week in her previous role as the school's deputy headteacher. As a result, staff are confident that they can be honest about their need for flexible working.

Taking a proactive approach

Staff who are due to take maternity leave are asked about their return plans before they go, giving the school time to work out the best way to accommodate their wishes. Flexible staff are celebrated, not tolerated. Candidates are told about the flexible approach during their tours of the school.

Taking time and care with job design

Leaders work hard to match part-time roles and partnerships with staff needs and personalities, as well as the needs of pupils.

Championing the benefits

Leaders are open about how the school benefits from flexible working. For example, they are positive with staff and parents about how job shares provide a 'fresh' teacher part-way through the week, as well as providing some pupils with a mid-week chance to start again. As a result, parents are generally supportive.

Making the most of staff members' outside interests

One part-time teacher runs the education unit in a local museum for the rest of her working week. The school has built strong links with the museum as a result and asked the teacher to use her experience to write the school's history curriculum.

Being flexible about flexible working

Leaders are careful not to assume that staff will work outside of their part-time arrangements, for example, if staff attend inset days on their scheduled day off, they are given the time back. Staff are allocated 3 days personal leave to allow them to attend their own children's school events or take care of other personal priorities.

Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19)

Leaders have noted a number of ways in which COVID-19 has changed working practices for the better.

As the school is part of a national academy trust (Reach2), leaders and staff were previously required to travel around the country for trust-wide meetings. These have been moved online, which benefits both staff and budgets, and will hopefully continue to some degree.

The school has embraced technology during lockdown, using a platform called SeeSaw to set work and engage with pupils (for example, posting videos of the nursery teacher reading stories online). They will continue to use SeeSaw to set homework and believe this technology could also support teachers' ability to work remotely in the future.

Outcome

The school's positive approach to flexible working means that it is no longer seen as something just for staff members who are parents, and has resulted in a number of interesting developments.

For example:

- there are currently 3 job share partnerships, including the year 1 team leaders
- a number of staff work part-time in a role designed to cover colleagues' planning, preparation and assessment time
- 2 year 6 teachers don't have a class of their own, but instead work a 0.6 contract spread across 5 mornings, taking smaller groups, set by ability, for further stretch and challenge
- 2 higher-level teaching assistants are working part-time while they study for university degrees

Staff retention has increased, with the number of leavers dropping from 16 in 2015 to 8 in 2018 and just 3 in 2019. Anecdotally, the improved well-being of the staff body has also been noted.

Headteacher Rebecca Misselbrook says,

Teachers and school support staff tend to be caring, family-oriented, values-driven people, they wouldn't choose this profession otherwise.

So it's important that school leaders allow them to provide the same care and attention for their own families and personal lives as they do for their pupils.

Flexible working allows our brilliant staff to balance the challenges of their role with the rest of their lives, and we benefit from this as much as they do. It's simple, really, if you keep your staff happy, they will stay.