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## Culture, Collaboration & CPD in your school

High-quality professional development within a high-challenge, low-risk environment is at the heart of an effective school. In this Best Practice Focus, principal **Ben Solly** outlines his research-driven strategies to create the conditions in which teachers can thrive, including a focus on autonomy, wellbeing, culture and collaboration



# Creating the conditions for your school staff to thrive

**A**s a headteacher, I have always insisted that the top line on my job description states that it is my responsibility to create the conditions within my school community where everyone can thrive.

I am very specific with the use of the term “everyone”. Many schools always put children or students first. I believe we should place students and staff as equal first.

I have seen too many school improvement strategies work staff to the bone in the pursuit of greater student outcomes. This results in staff burn-out and is unsustainable.

My pursuit of achieving the conditions in my school where everyone can thrive is founded upon the notion of staff being able to perform their professional responsibilities at the highest possible standard.

My vision for an authentic, self-improving school centres on this critical concept. If all of our staff

are completing their jobs exceptionally well, the school will become incrementally more effective and, as a result, students will receive a superb education.

Ultimately, I want the students in my school to be happy and safe, I want them to be taught really well, and I want them to be cared for compassionately in an environment where everyone is valued and known as an individual.

These are the core aspects of our school that I want our staff to focus on delivering, and if we are investing our resources or energies into strategies that do not positively affect one of these three things, we should probably stop doing it.

I am a strong believer in keeping things simple, focusing on strategies that make the biggest difference and then delivering these to the highest possible standard.

In this *Best Practice Focus*, which is aimed at school leaders and teachers, I intend to outline the main strategies that we use at



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Uppingham Community College to provide our staff with the conditions in which they can thrive.

I hope you are able to adapt some of our approaches for your own work. If you would like more reflections, I discussed some of the following ideas and approaches in more detail during a recent episode of *The SecEd Podcast* (SecEd, 2020).

## The theory

The last five years has seen a rapid growth of evidence-informed practice in schools in the UK, which

has transformed teaching and leadership strategies for the better.

When I think back to my training and indeed my formative years as a teacher, I cringe and shudder at the practices that were encouraged. Learning styles and Brain Gym are now thankfully a thing of the past in education. Schools in general now tend to study research carefully during the design of teacher CPD programmes.

What I have learned, however, is that any research should be scrutinised with a critical eye and

by asking key questions, not least: “What positive impact on our staff, students and school would this have?”

As a headteacher, I think it is important for my ideas about education to have credibility and be based on reliable research. If I am asking my staff to implement a particular set of strategies, they should be confident that I have not simply conjured these up from my imagination.

Instead, the approach I have taken has been to identify key pieces of education research that have particularly resonated with me and condense these into simple, practical strategies that are suitable for our school context.

As Professor Dylan Wiliam quite rightly says: “Everything works somewhere, but not everything works everywhere.”

In the design, creation and implementation of my strategies for creating the conditions for staff to thrive, I have based much of the theory on three core ideas, taken from academia and research, before developing and refining these to suit the priorities of our school.

## 1, Drive

The first originates from Daniel Pink’s seminal leadership account *Drive* (2009). This essential book is not aimed directly at teachers or education leaders, however its themes resound pertinently with our profession.

The main theme is motivation and how leaders can unleash the potential of people through a deep understanding of what motivates and drives us.

He writes: “Human beings have an innate inner drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives.”

So, three critical components underpin the overarching concept of motivation: Autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Pink expertly articulates, using examples from psychology research, that motivation and subsequent high performance is a direct result of these three crucial facets. This resonates strongly with me and I have based many of my approaches to headship on these concepts.

As the leader of a school, I can establish the vision and set

strategies, but I cannot do everything myself. Therefore, I have to unleash the potential of my staff for us to become a truly great school.

Unleashing the potential of my staff starts with autonomy. The staff have autonomy within the areas they are responsible for; essentially they take ownership of their work and are not micromanaged.

We have an overt distributed leadership strategy that forms the cornerstone of the way leaders work together towards the school’s priorities. This has evolved over time into a whole school coaching strategy that effectively has replaced the traditional line management structure.

Second, mastery, which is ultimately about people mastering their professional craft. This concept is based on the principle that people generally want to get really good at what they do.

Most human beings enjoy becoming more proficient and successful at things, and in a professional context if we can create structures that allow employees to develop and improve then we are on the road to sustainable, authentic improvement.

The way I interpret this is that teachers innately enjoy learning, and therefore as a profession we should commit ourselves to becoming incrementally more effective; no-one is ever the finished product and even the most fantastically successful practitioners should always be actively seeking ways in which to learn and grow. Consequently our CPD programme is entirely underpinned by this concept of mastery.

Finally, and most easy to adopt within a school, is purpose. If you ask most teachers about their *raison d’être*, they will cite many reasons for joining the profession that are more aligned with altruism than personal gain. Therefore, most teachers entering the profession already possess a plethora of purpose, the job of school leaders is to harness this, establish high levels of motivation and direct it appropriately.

## 2, Professional Capital

The second key idea from research that has strongly influenced my strategies for creating the conditions to thrive is that of *Professional Capital* by Professors Michael

Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012, 2013).

Through studying their work on professional capital closely I realised that to develop highly effective teachers and leaders I must carefully plan for developing the professional capital of the whole organisation.

But what does professional capital mean? If we consider the term “capital” in a business context, it refers to any value added to an organisation that increases its net worth. In educational terms we can easily understand the term “value-added” in relation to student progress, but my experience has shown me that we do not always implicitly understand how to recognise and develop the professional capital of the staff in our schools.

Hargreaves and Fullan helpfully dissect professional capital into three distinct components: human, social, and decisional capital.

**Human capital:** The talent, ability and skill of the staff within a school. Essentially I interpret this as how effective teachers are in the classroom in terms of their subject knowledge, understanding of pedagogy and their ability to unite these into high-quality lessons.

**Decisional capital:** The capability of teachers and staff to make effective judgements within their work – judgements on how to deal with situations, on the quality of student work, on how to manage and lead individuals and teams. I think of decisional capital as something that evolves and develops over time as we accrue experiences and learn from mistakes.

**Social capital:** Perhaps the most important. The way in which teachers and other members of staff within a school collaborate and work together in a collegiate and

supportive culture. There is powerful research that points towards schools making significant and sustainable improvements due to an investment and dedication towards developing the social capital within the school. The more that teachers are encouraged to work together, learn from each other and collaborate in research-based learning activities, the more effective the school becomes.

## Developing human capital

How do we make our teachers more effective? How much time do we dedicate to improving the things that actually make a difference to our schools?

School life is so busy and often unpredictable and as a result teachers and leaders can become distracted from the most critical aspects of their jobs. Far too often I see schools focusing on strategies that have no impact, taking up the time of teachers and leaders in pointless exercises because it might tick an Ofsted box, or because “we’ve always done it this way”.

Therefore, the precious development time that we have in schools should be focused on refining our approaches in the areas that do have impact.

How often do we focus on developing teacher subject knowledge or honing our instructional delivery of content? Teachers across the country are crying out for the opportunity to spend more time working with their colleagues on developing their classroom craft in these two crucial areas, but as school leaders how much time do we dedicate towards this?

If we are serious about investing in the human capital of our staff then this needs to be reflected in our strategic plans for improving the quality of teaching across the school.

## Developing decisional capital

This is far less straightforward as it is hard to develop the decisional capital of staff quickly. It takes time and as a strategic development principle it is a real slow-burner that will yield results over a longer timeframe.

In terms of long-term sustainability and the authentic growth of the school, developing decisional capital among staff is extremely powerful. It is not easy

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to improve the decision-making abilities of teachers across a school – as individuals we all deal with situations differently and life would be very boring if this was not the case.

However, we should consider what schools can do to help their staff develop their decisional capital. For me, the answer has to be to invest in coaching. Later in this article you will read about our approaches to coaching, which are creating a supportive framework to enable individuals to become more reflective practitioners and more thoughtful in the way they teach and the way in which they conduct themselves professionally.

### Developing social capital

Where human capital focuses on the talents and skills of individual teachers and decisional capital draws upon their capacity to make effective judgements, the concept of social capital is concerned with the way in which teachers work together within an organisation.

For me, schools can structure their CPD programmes and internal meeting structures to allow teachers to work more effectively together and as a result social capital can develop. We should ask ourselves some key questions:

- How much time do we give to staff to collaborate on joint planning, or joint evaluation activities?
- How much time do we spend discussing things that don't make a difference in unnecessary meetings. Could we use this time together more effectively?
- Do we use Teacher Learner Communities or approaches such as Lesson Study as mechanisms for developing social capital within our teachers?
- Are our CPD programmes focused on harnessing internal expertise within the school or do we rely on buying in external resources?
- Do we engage in action research and do we allow teachers to work collaboratively on joint projects focused on school improvement?

### 3, The school environment

The third piece of education research that underpins my idea of

all staff thriving is the work of Kraft and Papay (2014), who identified six factors that correlate with teacher improvement.

Their focus on the “school environment” aligns strongly with my vision of creating the right conditions in school for everyone to thrive. The authors used a decade of teacher survey data from 174 schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg district in North Carolina, matched against those teachers’ students’ test scores in reading and mathematics.

There is such strong alignment between the Kraft and Papay research and our vision for how we want our school to develop and grow, that we base the majority of our strategies on the principles of their work. The six key factors Kraft and Papay identified are:

- **Peer collaboration:** The extent to which teachers are able to collaborate to refine their teaching practices and work together to solve problems in the school.
- **Principled leadership:** The extent to which school leaders support teachers and address their concerns about school issues.
- **Behaviour:** The extent to which the school is a safe environment where rules are consistently enforced and school leaders assist teachers in their efforts to maintain an orderly classroom.
- **Professional development:** The extent to which the school provides sufficient time and resources for professional development and uses them in ways that enhance teaching.
- **Culture:** The extent to which the school environment is characterised by mutual trust, respect, openness and commitment to student achievement.
- **Appraisal:** The extent to which teacher evaluation provides meaningful feedback that helps teachers improve their instruction and is conducted in an objective and consistent manner. Teachers improve more quickly in supportive schools. This notion of a “supportive school” is exactly what we are striving to achieve at Uppingham Community College. However, it does not happen by chance and it does not happen overnight. It requires careful



planning, consistent modelling of exemplary leadership behaviours and principled, ethical leadership. My translation of this research into our school context is that the culture established by leaders is critical.

### Culture critical

We talk about culture a great deal in education and it means many things to many different people. I recently heard someone define school culture as: “The positive work people complete in school without being asked to.”

If a school has a healthy culture then staff will consistently go above and beyond their job description. Essentially, they will be highly motivated, autonomous professionals, who are mastering their craft and who are prepared to go the extra mile for their colleagues and students.

Andy Buck would call this “discretionary effort” (2018) and this can only be achieved in a school where the culture and climate have established the right conditions.

### What does it look like in practice?

Our school vision is a simple statement: Everyone at Uppingham Community College thrives, making excellent progress in their learning, achievement and development.

As the principal, I see it as my job

to ensure everyone is working together towards achieving this vision. I purposefully ensured the vision statement is only one sentence long and is not overly complex; I want it to be memorable, impactful and deeply important to everyone associated with the school.

However, behind the simplicity of a one-sentence vision statement lies a depth of thinking, experience and learning. Behind it sits a great deal of research completed by respected education academics and experts in their field.

All I have done is taken the pertinent findings of this research and distilled them into a series of strategies that I aspire for my school to deliver.

In this section of the article I hope to explain these strategies in such a way that enables readers to take ideas and concepts and apply aspects of them in their own schools.

However, before we delve into the specifics of how we have put theory into practice, it is worthwhile sharing some of the pre-ambles from the Uppingham Community College strategic plan. This is a section that I include before any of the strategies are outlined in this important document, as I feel it is vital for all staff to understand the rationale:

*Delivering high levels of impact in education is of paramount importance and everyone at the school is dedicated to ensuring we provide a world class education for our young people. However, the manner in which we work, the ethics and philosophies that underpin our motivations, decisions and behaviours form the cornerstone of our school culture.*

*Culture in schools is critical and at Uppingham it is culture that will drive our success. As the principal, I am extremely proud to hold the responsibility for establishing the culture and conditions in which everyone can thrive; this is why our vision is so explicit in extolling the virtues of thriving, in every sense of the word. If we all thrive and make excellent progress in our learning, achievement and our development then we can honestly say we are a truly great school.*

*I believe that by investing in the development of our staff, treating them with respect and trusting their professionalism, we will have created the conditions in which they can thrive and this in turn will enable our students to achieve incredible outcomes, both academically and personally.*

*I have really high ambitions for us as a school but I want us to work in a manner that focuses on the right things and with our core values –*

*Respect, Honesty and Kindness – at the centre of everything. This means working incredibly hard together, challenging each other to become even more effective and never taking our eye off the things that are most important. Our success, in terms of student outcomes, both academic and holistic, will be a by-product of our dedication to our core values and educational principles.*

### Specific strategies

So far I have shared three key influences from education academia that underpin our school culture and strategies. I have also shared with you the rationales and guiding principles that influence the way that I expect our staff to work together and how our school culture is shaped. Below are the specific strategies that we employ to create the conditions for everyone in our school to thrive. I hope you find them useful.

“ Teaching is the bread and butter of our profession, but how much time do we actually spend trying to get better at it ”

### Developmental lesson observations

I love the Stephen Covey quote: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”

It is beautifully simple and in complex organisations like schools, sometimes the main thing can become lost in the chaos.

To explain our “main thing” at Uppingham Community College, I must refer to the previously mentioned notion of the three core aspects of our school:

- Students being happy and safe.
- Teaching students really well.
- Caring for our students compassionately and everyone being valued as an individual.

Teaching in schools surely has to be the “main thing”, along with safeguarding. Teaching is the bread and butter of our profession, but how much time do we actually spend trying to get better at it?

My frustration has always been that so many school processes actively work against teachers, are often punitive and are not supported by the research suggesting the most effective ways of increasing teacher effectiveness.

We know that there is very little validity or reliability in judging the quality of a teacher using lesson observations. Professor Robert Coe famously concluded, in his report *What makes great teaching?* (Coe et al, 2014), that lesson observation judgements are no more reliable than flipping a coin. So why has our profession invested so much energy into such a pointless exercise? And why on earth would we tie this directly to teacher career progression and pay awards?

It seems entirely absurd to me and I am very proud of the approaches we have developed over time at Uppingham to replace processes such as lesson observations, performance-management and performance-related pay. Eradicating much of the nonsense that has plagued the teaching profession has been a key driver in establishing the right conditions for our staff to thrive.

When I became a headteacher in 2014, I used this as an opportunity to stop doing many of the things that schools had traditionally done that had no impact and no grounding in research. Grading individual lessons and individual teachers using Ofsted terminology was the first thing I put an end to.

Over a six-year period I have evaluated, tweaked and refined this approach and now at Uppingham I believe we have a system that supports teacher development in a “high-challenge, low-risk” environment.

Developmental lesson observations (DLOs) are used as a strategy for teachers improving their effectiveness in the classroom. Every single member of teaching staff in the school, including myself, participates in the cycle of DLOs and we all adopt the attitude that every teacher can always improve and should constantly strive to. The main features of our DLO system are as follows:

### Rationale: Why do we use DLOs?

- Grading individual lessons does not provide us with an accurate account of the effectiveness of a teacher.
- Grading lessons using Ofsted criteria can label teachers and creates a high-stakes, high-pressure and high-accountability environment for lesson observations. By not attaching a grade to a lesson observation we can use the opportunity of having another trusted professional in our classroom to learn and refine our teaching practices.
- A wealth of educational research can be found supporting the use of lesson observations as a professional development opportunity rather than as the sole mechanism for judging teacher effectiveness.

### Principles: What key concepts underpin our approach?

- We stop using Ofsted terminology in any way when describing the quality of a lesson.
- Lesson observations will not be used to determine pay progression.
- We commit to using lesson observations as a way of improving the impact of our teaching through a collaborative and collegiate approach involving our trusted colleagues.
- We will use skilful and thoughtful questioning during professional discussions following a lesson observation to encourage teachers to develop greater self-



awareness and self-reflection so they can identify how to enhance the impact of their teaching.

**Process: How does it work?**

- Teachers are expected to complete two DLOs per academic year to support the development of their teaching.
- Teachers identify an aspect of pedagogy that they are seeking to develop. This becomes the “focus” for the lesson.
- The coach (observer) will create a range of questions while observing the lesson that centre on this focus and support the teacher in reflecting on the impact of their teaching in this area.
- A “professional discussion” (not feedback) takes place quickly after the lesson, on the same day. If this is not possible, it takes place the following day.
- The professional discussion should end with the teacher identifying a particular area of their practice that they will seek to develop further. The teacher will then trial a variety of strategies over time before their next DLO.

**Reassuring staff**

Decoupling lesson observations from performance-related pay instantly gave staff the reassurance that DLOs would be used solely as a coaching mechanism to improve teacher effectiveness.

Equally, teachers welcomed the

opportunity to not be labelled. We do not generally subscribe to labelling children, so why do we do the same with our teachers? Instead, we adopt an attitude that every teacher can improve their effectiveness and we will commit to using our colleagues to support our development as classroom practitioners.

**Personal Improvement Planning**

Personal Improvement Planning (PIP) is my attempt to ensure that the processes commonly known as performance-management or appraisal actually work for teachers rather than against them.

I had always felt that these processes were not helpful in any way and did more to build resentment in an organisation than they did trust.

How could I build a school culture where everyone is able to thrive if the adults do not feel trusted? For me, this would be an impossibility and therefore every strategy, every process in school must be used to build trust, treat people as professionals and respect them as individuals.

Deploying an appraisal system across a school that relies on unreliable data and contains unachievable targets will only demoralise teachers, and therefore we need to create something better, something more appropriate, something that will inspire teachers to positively engage with their career development.

If we think back to Daniel Pink’s concept of autonomy, mastery and purpose, the topic of teacher appraisal is a pertinent one. I believe it is extremely challenging to develop a school culture where the staff are highly motivated, autonomous and dedicated to mastering their professional craft when the processes that underpin their career progression are punitive, unreliable and invalid.

This is where I started when creating the now well-established PIP cycle at Uppingham.

The cycle spans an academic year, but rather than setting data-focused targets, we ask our teachers to identify how they are going to develop their teaching practice, how they are going to contribute to their department’s priorities, and what professional development they will commit to during the year.

The teachers then use their two DLOs to refine the aspects of pedagogy they are seeking to improve but, importantly, these are coaching opportunities and not judgemental observations as previously explained.

A critical aspect of building trust in the organisation, and therefore supporting the concepts of autonomy and mastery, is that we expect all staff, teaching and support, to progress through the pay scale each year.

As a teacher, as long as the *Teachers’ Standards* are being met and the member of staff has positively engaged with the PIP process, then they should automatically progress to the next pay spine point. There are no data targets to hit and student performances in exams do not

influence the career progression of teachers.

The notion of teachers thriving in a supportive school is one of the key findings from the Kraft and Papay research discussed earlier. Building a supportive school culture requires a deep level of trust throughout the organisation and the “high-challenge, low-risk” mantra that we use is central to achieving this.

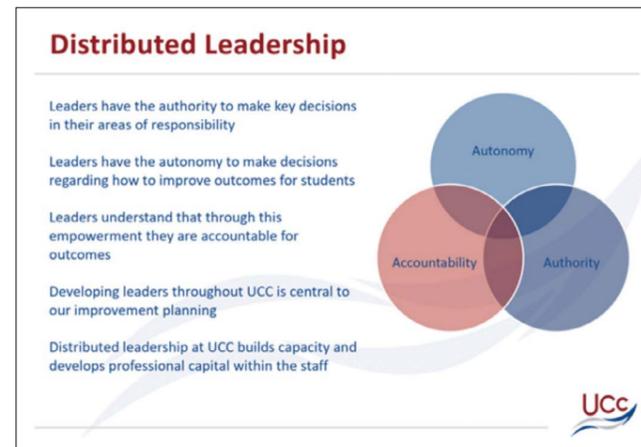
Teachers understand that they will not be judged when a senior leader or colleague observes their lesson; the observer is there solely to help them improve. Equally, teachers know that the PIP cycle is a supportive rather than punitive process, existing to develop them as an individual rather than catch them out.

**Distributed leadership**

Linking closely to the theme of trust is the distributed leadership strategy that has been a pivotal factor in us developing leadership capacity so that we build a sustainable and authentically self-improving school.

It has also been a fundamental component of our aim to develop the decisional capital within our organisation. We want our leaders to be able to make effective decisions under pressure and it is impossible to achieve this if leaders are not trusted to get on with their jobs.

We give leaders the autonomy and authority to make key decisions in their areas of responsibility and we take collective accountability across the leadership hierarchy for delivering outcomes. This is described in the diagram below.



**Autonomy: Uppingham Community College’s distributed leadership model**

The concept of shared accountability has meant that we have been able to develop a coaching structure across the school where leaders act as coaches more than line managers. This means we have a “no blame” culture as I do not want my senior leaders telling middle leaders what to do, instead they should coach them so that they can develop solutions themselves and become more autonomous leaders.

This clearly carries some inherent risks, but it sends a clear message that as staff we adopt a growth mindset philosophy by learning from our mistakes and we work collaboratively and supportively to achieve our vision of everyone thriving. After all, how can leaders thrive in a high-stakes, high-accountability environment when they are micro-managed and not trusted? In 2018, I wrote in *SecEd* about distributed leadership in more detail (Solly, 2018).

**Professional development**

The professional development programme at Uppingham Community College is a vital factor in our vision of everyone thriving. I think it is critical to invest in the staff so that, in turn, our students will benefit from highly trained, highly motivated and highly dedicated professionals. We adopt the phrase: “Train your staff well so they are able to leave, treat them so well that they want to stay.” This mantra is the foundation of our CPD programme and has a significant impact in recruiting and retaining talented staff.

There are several facets to our CPD programme, the most influential of which started five years ago with the Embedding Formative Assessment (EFA) project, which was coordinated by the SSAT and leaned heavily on the work of Professor Dylan Wiliam. Our success with this project led to us becoming an Ambassador School for the SSAT and the project overall had a huge impact on both the human and social capital of staff at Uppingham (SSAT, 2018, 2019).

The EFA project significantly upskilled our teachers by honing their assessment for learning techniques in the classroom, therefore increasing the human capital across the school through a structured programme.

The organisation of Teacher Learner Communities, which meet every four weeks to develop their classroom craft, enabled our school to develop considerable social capital within the staff, with high levels of collaboration, support and cooperation between teachers in all departments. This way of working has evolved beyond the lifespan of the project and staff collaboration has now become the cultural norm in the school.

Coaching, as mentioned earlier, is an important facet of our staff development. We took the decision two years ago to employ a professional leadership coach to further develop our leadership capacity and decisional capital.

Every leader in the school has the opportunity to work with our leadership coach over a 20-week programme. While this is a significant investment of time and resource, the impact on our leaders from a professional and personal perspective has been fantastic.

Recently, in order to ensure our staff receive bespoke CPD which is linked to their professional aspirations and their career stage, we introduced the UCC Teacher Development Programme, which consists of a menu of professional development opportunities for all teaching staff. This ensures our experienced staff continue to develop and grow, while we nurture (and therefore retain) our less experienced staff.

**Other strategies**

We know that teachers thrive in a supportive school environment, so what other things have we introduced to achieve this? There have been a number of really easy wins within our CPD programme.

One of these has been our academic reading initiative, which involves every member of staff receiving an educational book of their choice at the end of the summer term. Genuinely, this is the best £900 we invest in staff

development each year. We produce a reading list but there is also a “free choice” option for staff and this means that all teachers and all support staff enter the summer holiday period with a book to read that will hopefully have a positive impact on their professional work when they return in September.

Linked to this, we do not have any staff in school on the first day back in January – instead we ask staff to use this time to write a concise, one-page summary of their book, using a simple template that we produce.

We then use our first staff meeting at the end of the first day of the spring term to host a market place-style activity where staff share their reviews, swap books, discuss what they have learned and what they have implemented in their work. Staff have the choice of keeping their book, swapping it with a colleague, or donating it to the staff CPD library.

This really simple CPD initiative is having a positive impact on the human and social capital of the school and is contributing significantly to establishing the culture of a “supportive school” where everyone can thrive.

**Our Workload and Wellbeing Charter**

The final strategy I would like to share is the overt way in which we make a commitment to our vision. This transparency started with my pre-amble in the strategic plan but has now evolved into a Charter which details all of the strategies we are implementing across the school.

From my perspective as the principal, if I am to achieve my vision and the first line of my job description – creating the conditions where everyone at the school can thrive – then delivering all of the content within our Workload and Wellbeing Charter is critical.

You can download our Workload and Wellbeing Charter (see further information) – essentially we have

attempted to strip away as many of the barriers that prevent teachers from being able to do their jobs and thus we allow them to focus on the main thing – teaching.

It also explicitly outlines our commitment as a school to create the conditions where we can authentically improve year-on-year, in a sustainable way, without any clever tricks.

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