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**Thomas Gainsborough school:
Enhancing staff well-being and
improving absence rates**

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This case study highlights the importance of flexible working conditions, dedicated well-being support, and strategic management in overcoming high absence rates amongst staff, as well as improving retention and recruitment of high-quality staff.

Background

The East of England FWAMS are situated in the rural town of Sudbury in Thomas Gainsborough School, an academy of 1600 students. The school is close to Cambridge, Norwich and London to attract new teachers and 65% of the staff in schools commute from outside the town. Thomas Gainsborough School is part of the Unity Schools Partnership, the biggest Trust in the East. The Trusts remit covers 40 schools – 25 primary, 10 secondary and 5 special schools - across Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Essex.



Challenges

The impacts of COVID-19, expected staff departures e.g. retirement and a change in leadership, all contributed to teacher recruitment becoming increasingly difficult across an already challenging landscape. The school faced higher rates of staff absence post COVID-19 (see data below) combined with increased staff turnover. Due to the appeal of the extensive flexible working conditions offered outside of teaching, Thomas Gainsborough addressed their own flexible working conditions in a bid to:

- ✓ Retain existing staff and attract new talent
- ✓ Improve the wellbeing of existing and future staff and improve sickness absence rates.

Data

Post COVID, both the average percentage of teachers taking sickness absence, and the number of days they were absent, increased. In the 2022/23 academic year, the school were faced with 1335 days lost through illness, and 1185 days of paid leave.

| | 2022/23 | 2023/24 |
|--------------|---------|---|
| Absence Days | 1335 | 934.5 (30% reduction once strategies implemented) |
| Paid Leave | 1185 | 237 (80% reduction once strategies implemented) |

Strategies Implemented

- ✓ To manage absence and leave more effectively, a dedicated staff wellbeing manager was appointed, to conduct thorough return-to-work meetings following absences, to further understand and consistently improve the support available for staff needs.
- ✓ On the back of staff feedback, the number of part-time positions increased by 30%
- ✓ The school introduced job shares and phased retirements for senior staff to attract and retain staff.
- ✓ The school implemented some bespoke flexible working arrangements to accommodate personal needs such as time off to support medical appointments and allowing teaching staff to take their PPA offsite.
- ✓ Reviewed and introduced robust absence leave policies informed by staff feedback.

Adjustments made to implement change:

Smarter budget management: Thomas Gainsborough increased their cover supervisor team at a cost of £40,000 (compared to the nearly £80,000 spent on supply teachers in the previous academic year).



Tailored Recruitment: The school ensured consistent subject-specific cover to support the implementation of some flexible working practices. Cover teachers and supervisors were employed from pool of ex-colleagues in English, Maths, Humanities and MFL, reducing external cover budget and allowing for continuity in learning.

Timetable adjustments: Introducing a system whereby 100-minute lessons were split into two 50-minute sessions, meaning that lessons can be adjusted to accommodate some bespoke flex requests whilst ensuring continuity in teaching.



Outcomes



These strategies led to a significant reduction in staff absence, with sickness absence rates reduced by 30% and requests for paid leave by 80%. This improvement in attendance not only enhanced productivity but also fostered a more positive and engaged work environment. Employees felt more supported and valued, knowing they had the flexibility to manage their personal and professional lives effectively.



Additionally, the availability of phased retirements played a crucial role in improving staff retention. By allowing employees to gradually reduce their working hours as they approached retirement, we were able to retain experienced staff members for a longer period. This approach not only provided a smoother transition for retiring employees but also ensured that their valuable knowledge and expertise were not lost abruptly. As a result, we maintained a more stable and experienced workforce, which had a direct positive impact on pupil outcomes. The continuity and stability in staffing allowed for better planning, consistent teaching quality, and stronger relationships between staff and students.