



## **Maintaining a Work Life Balance is possible**

**Ian Andain, Headteacher of Broadgreen High School, Liverpool**

Having been a headteacher for over 17 years it's easy to forget what it was like taking on the role for the first time. But looking back on it now, one thing I have found is that the rewards and challenges of the job remain the same, however long you do it. Whether you are a primary, special and secondary head, it is the students that are always the priority and rightly so. Because of this focus, it is easy to forget how important it is to try to maintain a healthy work life balance and how this can affect your ability to do the job, both positively and negatively. The ability to foster and maintain positive well-being is therefore one of the key tasks for any headteacher.

### **Daunting Prospect**

Being the head of a school the size of Broadgreen High could seem a daunting prospect, currently we have about 1,300 students, 90 teaching staff and 120 support staff on our inner city school site in Liverpool. However, the same strategies for achieving a healthy work life balance that we use can be achieved in any size school.

### **Distributed Leadership**

For me, the key is the successful distribution of leadership. In many cases, and it seems to happen across all organisations, people take too much upon themselves. This is probably human nature, but when a few people take on the majority of tasks there are two results. First, there is a build up of stress because the workload outweighs the time available. Second, we end up managing tasks that perhaps could be better dealt with elsewhere, such as unblocking toilets or organising community events. For example, I've recently employed a full-time Director of Community Affairs who looks after the school's relationship with the local community, arranging fundraising, applying

for grants and liaising with community groups. It's a full time job for a non-teaching member of staff and enables myself and the deputies to focus on other priorities.

This distribution of leadership takes the pressure off the head and moves away from the notion of the head as the 'all powerful' force at school. Of course the buck stops with the headteacher but responsibility needs to be spread across the leadership team for the school to be successful.

### **Collaborative Working**

By building a strong leadership team that works collaboratively, it is possible to delegate responsibility and authority, safe in the knowledge that the job will be done well. Some heads will say that they don't like to lose control but delegation brings its own rewards. For example, seeing colleagues succeed where they thought they would never be able to do so, is a great feeling. Of course, building this team ethos is a challenge in itself and does take time, but if it is achieved it means that heads aren't constantly having to make all the decisions because staff are empowered to do so themselves. In addition, this has the significant benefit of helping staff develop skills for their future career helping meet the needs of succession planning.

### **Beyond the School**

Collaboration also extends beyond the school gates with heads no longer feeling like they are working in isolation that perhaps they felt a few years ago. There is more help and assistance for headteachers than ever before, with current school leaders committed to passing on their knowledge and experience and additional support from Local Authorities, Councils and organisations such as The National College for School Leadership.

### **Balancing Act**

It is clear then that collaboration is vital to developing a healthy work life balance for heads. But a headteacher is no different from anyone else and is an individual for whom the inevitable stresses and strains of the job will have some effect. As I mentioned earlier, it is easy to forget about your personal

needs when you are a head as you are focused on your students and staff. But, thinking about yourself more can really help. For me this comes in the form of listening to music or relaxing with a book at home and I also try and make time during the day to read the newspapers. We have staff de-stressing days at Broadgreen where we get trained reflexologists and aromatherapists to come in and provide relaxing treatments. It's a great way to offer additional emotional support and take a step back from work.

### **Me time**

Setting aside time for yourself is difficult but important. I've heard of heads who find it useful to work one day a week outside of the school to give them time to concentrate solely on specific tasks without being interrupted. This brings into focus the skill of workload management. Being able to arrange a working day out of the office does take some planning and the confidence that your senior leadership team can work without you being in the school building but the long-term benefit will almost certainly outweigh the short term challenge.

Finally, and probably one of the more obvious things I have talked about in this article, is the importance of maintaining a positive outlook and sense of humour. There are always going to be times when things aren't going well but being able to laugh about it at the end of the day can make all the difference. Apart from the fact that it will definitely make you feel better, it also reassures everyone else that it isn't the end of the world.

It goes without saying that strategies for developing an achievable work life balance are challenging and what works for one person might not work for somebody else, but the advantages of trying and succeeding definitely outweigh the disadvantages.

From my own experiences and talking to other heads, it is clear that it is easy to slip into the cycle of taking too much work on without having the time to do it all. However, by distributing the leadership among your team, tapping into their enthusiasm and working on your own ability to take a step back, I firmly

believe it is possible for headteachers to achieve a healthy work life balance, keep stress at bay and do what we all went into teaching for – giving our students the best possible education and start in life.