

School business managers

Paul Mathews, headteacher, and Jo Watts, school business manager, Norbury Manor Primary, Croydon

Paul Mathews is headteacher of Norbury Manor Primary, Croydon, and Jo Watts is the school business manager (SBM) as well as an SBM advocate for NCSL in the London region.

Paul had returned to headship after a spell as workforce reform adviser with the local authority. Norbury Manor was struggling and he decided that one way to raise standards was to increase leadership capacity in the school. He employed Jo as SBM and she is now part of a three-strong leadership team alongside Paul and the non-teaching deputy, who leads on learning and teaching.

Jo effectively oversees the running of the school as an organisation, taking care of HR, marketing, finance, health and safety, and premises management. She line-manages 13 staff, including admin and premises staff and after-school and breakfast-club staff.

It frees Paul to concentrate on leadership, and the benefits are visible in many ways. One of Jo's roles in the school is to monitor legionella testing, for example, and she has organised training for site staff in how to conduct the tests. This saves money by avoiding the need to bring in outside testing contractors, and has given the school total control over the process.

"That's a good example of the value of the role because the repercussions of getting that wrong are very serious," Paul said. "Things like health and safety dominated my thinking in my first headship and I was only spending 10 per cent of my time on teaching and learning matters, and it was challenging."

Saving money is good but, more importantly, there is a direct link between the SBM's role and teaching and learning, Paul stresses.

"For example, we had no whiteboards in school and now have them in 15 classes and in other areas. It has cost £60,000 to £70,000 and we related that entirely to the money saved through the SBM post being created."

There is a clear rationale for having the SBM as a member of the leadership team, Paul said. "It works on a couple of counts. It reflects the level of responsibility she has and gives a message to everyone that the role is important. It also gives the SBM the chance to see the impact that their role has on teaching and learning in the classroom."

Sarah Smith, headteacher, St John's Primary School, Birmingham

Sarah Smith's approach to managing the organisation side of her school has been to develop existing staff and to buy in expertise where necessary.

Acknowledging that the financial management side was too much for an administrator to handle, alongside other admin work, she has bought into an independent service that provides a financial manager for her school for half a day each week.

"We are a two-form entry primary in inner-city Birmingham with a moderate budget, and so this provides enough support for us," she said. "Our administrator continues to manage ordering and other general tasks and the finance person manages budget. She comes to finance meetings with me with the governing body and keeps me briefed on areas such as how staffing changes affect budget."

Meanwhile, the school site supervisor has been given an expanded role, capitalising on his expertise in project management, managing contractors and getting quotes – all tasks that Sarah was more than happy to relinquish.

The important thing is not to be wedded to one way of working but always to be on the look-out for opportunities to re-evaluate the systems in place, she said.

“My administrator is my right arm and she will retire in two years’ time and she has a skill base I might struggle to replace. At that point, I may go along the school business manager route and will look into appointing someone for reception and general administration. I could then use the remainder of the administrator salary with the finance manager budget and recruit an SBM.”

Heather Mullaney, headteacher, and Stephen Dewhurst, school business manager, The Heath School, Runcorn

Heather Mullaney took up her headteacher role at The Heath School, Runcorn, in 2004, when the school’s GCSE results had suffered a downturn.

She led a wholesale rethink of the school’s approach to leadership and learning, replacing a complex school development plan with a ‘framework for learning’ centred on personalised learning, and with strands devoted to different aspects of learning: assessment, curriculum, professional development, partnerships, school environment, technology and management. Heather said: “Everything in the school has to be for learning. Everyone on the leadership team leads one strand and is passionate about it, so if there is a new initiative introduced, we know exactly who is responsible for it and who is accountable for it. It’s totally distributed leadership and very powerful.”

In 2008, the school scored 93 per cent in GCSE five A*–C and is rated as a high-performing specialist school with leadership partnership as a second specialism.

The structure has liberated Heather to be outward-looking and to focus on the school’s strategic needs, while a head of school takes care of operational matters, including monitoring the school’s progress against external targets.

Stephen Dewhurst, the school’s business manager, is responsible for the school environment strand. His responsibilities include budget-setting, personnel, financial reporting to governors, health and safety, looking after the building, and buying in associated services. He will also oversee the school’s rebuilding project under Building Schools for the Future.

“Traditionally, all of this has been done by heads but we are passionate about the move that we have made and it’s working for our school. I want my head to be out there and keeping us at the cutting edge of education developments – not concentrating on organisational matters.”

The team approach to leadership has enabled Heather to have a healthy work–life balance: “I can go home at night knowing that everything carries on in school even though I’m not there.” It has also reduced the loneliness that headteachers often speak of as being part of the role.

Heather said: “Headship hasn’t been lonely for me. If you have a really good distributed leadership team, there’s someone you can talk to all the time and they challenge you, and you them.”