

Helping staff thrive so pupils succeed

A guide to people-centred systems
for school and trust leaders



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Education



This guide will help school and trust leaders take action following some exciting research.

Our whitepaper, *Happy Staff, Happy Pupils: The new tools and rules to help staff and pupils thrive*, examined the link between morale and success. It presented strong correlations that suggested where staff were happy in a school, pupils were also happy.

It also explained that where staff and pupils agreed they were happy, student Progress 8 scores were better.

All of which leaves you with two questions

If you're a school or Multi Academy Trust (MAT) leader, how do you centre your culture around happy staff?

Furthermore, how do you create systems to support these processes?

That's the purpose of this guide.

Happy Staff, Happy Pupils: The new tools and rules to help staff and pupils thrive is a treasure trove of data and insights. **[Click here to download this important document](#)** and see the figures for yourself.

A guide built on sector expertise

The information in this guide comes from a number of contributors, including sector-experienced specialists at IRIS who spent months examining the information from our *Happy Staff, Happy Pupils* whitepaper.

We also drew on information highlighted in an accompanying webinar.

The contributors to both the whitepaper and this event included the following experts:

John Murphy spent the last ten years as CEO at of one of the largest trusts in the UK and now works to support those in the same position across the country.

Matt Meckin is CEO of The Rivers C of E Academy Trust and has over twenty years of experience in the education sector across primary, middle and secondary schools.

Simon Freeman is the Education Managing Director at IRIS Software Group. He leads teams dedicated to creating software that enables educators to deliver the best possible outcomes for students.

Iona Jackson is Director of Strategy at Edurio, a trusted provider of stakeholder surveys for school and trust leaders.

PART ONE – Leading a people-centred MAT

One critical theme that came up repeatedly in our research was that leaders matter. This doesn't just mean senior leadership: it also includes any line manager.

Effective performance management, clear career development, and leaders understanding and addressing staff needs all correlate strongly with increased workplace happiness.

But what kind of leader makes this happen?

The power of authentic leadership

Authenticity resonates on both a personal and professional level. It builds a foundation of trust in an organisation and makes you more relatable to staff.

Imperfect people make perfect leaders

Authentic leadership also includes admitting when you don't know something and when you are wrong.

The positive effect of this is that staff embrace their own vulnerability. Perspectives shift; mistakes no longer feel career-defining to staff, and they become an opportunity to learn.

Know your organisation

Schools are about understanding and knowledge, so it is no surprise that leaders must truly know their school or trust.

If you are a trust leader, that means establishing a relationship between you and your executive team, your leaders, other staff, your children and their families.

The best leaders tend to be fully present. They head out to the different schools in their trust to see how well every level in their organisation is functioning.

The power of listening

Your organisation will be full of self-starters who are experts in their chosen field. That's good news if you are an "active listener".

By genuinely hearing and valuing staff input, leaders can address concerns more effectively and align organisational goals with the needs, aspirations and insights of their team.

To do this, you need to know the full reality that your staff face. You need to take a "temperature check" when talking to them, give them the space to share their issues and place the right level of accountability on them in return.

This has a powerful, emotional impact. Remember the last time someone at a higher level of your organisation stopped, listened and acted on your suggestions. It feels great, and you feel invested in the outcomes.

It's essential for staff to feel safe expressing themselves and to take risks where reasonable. This psychological safety allows people to suggest new processes and solve lingering problems.



Fostering an engaging environment that supports staff

Listening to your staff in person is just one important approach to creating a people-centred system in your school or trust.

Quality staff engagement must run through your organisation as a cohesive strategy. If you want happy staff, they need to feel listened to at all levels and on a regular basis.

Start by measuring engagement: Survey your staff (via apps or a simple suggestion box) and speak to them directly to understand how well your existing approach to engagement is working.

Define the aim of any new or updated engagement strategy: Why do you want to engage with staff more? We have suggested it's to have "happy staff" in this guide, but consider more specific areas like reducing turnover and driving collaboration. Crucially, also think about how you can measure this engagement and its effect.

Figure out what new processes you are putting in place to drive this engagement: For example, will you set up working groups that report to the SLT? Will you implement regular surveys? **The CIPD** has some fantastic resources for research into this area.

Set out your implementation plan: What steps will this initiative require? Who is going to be responsible? How will you get buy-in from the rest of the school or trust to ensure it remains supported? A strong relationship with the board and trustees will help you succeed when adding new strategies or implementing other important changes. It's worth introducing them to a concept early on so they can feel involved, get aligned and become invested.



What specific changes can you make, according to our Happy Staff, Happy Pupils research?

Which areas of improvement should you look at next, according to the data in our whitepaper?

Performance management: Performance management processes need to be consistent and clearly set out. This is particularly important for less experienced teachers who need to know there is a strong level of guidance and support close at hand.

However, performance management should never feel punitive. Reviews should be contextualised by success and growth rather than become a whistlestop tour of professional missteps.

Career progression opportunities: Career progression opportunities are strongly linked to workplace happiness. If you are in a trust, that is good news. MATs can offer career progression routes across their schools and operations, so they don't have to look elsewhere.

Flexible working: Some staff want flexible working, others do not. However, for those who do, it has a real effect on their likelihood of recommending their school to others. What can you do to help them?





Benefits can make all the difference when competing for and retaining staff. Here's how:

One of the big benefits you can give people is time so they can study and grow professionally.

Another is **flexibility**, which allows people to do more of their work on their own terms.

Think about their **quality of life**: are there any medical or health benefits you can offer?

Also consider **amenities** – are staff staples like tea and coffee up to scratch in the staff room? Is the staff room itself a welcoming, maintained environment?

Other great ideas that will make all the difference to staff

Problem-solving professional development:

Offer training and workshops that address specific difficulties staff face.

Workload audits: Conduct reviews to identify and reduce unnecessary administrative burdens.

Mentorship programs: Pair experienced staff with newer staff to provide guidance and support.

Regular check-ins: Schedule one-on-one meetings to discuss individual challenges and progress

Wellbeing initiatives: Implement programs to support staff mental health and work-life balance.

Streamlined communication: Reduce unnecessary meetings and emails to respect teachers' time.

Autonomy: Trust teachers with more decision-making power in their classrooms and curriculum planning.

A performance management process tick-list

Good performance management might include the following:



Clear and achievable goals:

- Set specific, measurable objectives aligned with the school's vision and development plan
- Ensure goals are realistic and attainable within the appraisal cycle



Regular feedback and coaching:

- Provide ongoing feedback throughout the year, not just at formal review meetings
- Offer coaching and support to help staff improve and meet their objectives



Standardised processes:

- Implement consistent appraisal procedures across the school/trust
- Use clear criteria for assessing performance against teacher standards



Focus on professional development:

- Identify individual training needs and opportunities for growth
- Link appraisal to continuous professional development plans



Collaborative approach:

- Involve staff in setting their objectives
- Encourage self-reflection and input from the appraisee



Holistic view of performance:

- Consider multiple sources of evidence, not just student data
- Look at overall contribution to school improvement



Regular review meetings:

- Schedule periodic check-ins to discuss progress and adjust goals if needed
- Don't wait until year-end to address issues or celebrate successes



Supportive, developmental focus:

- Frame appraisal as a tool for growth, not just evaluation
- Provide resources and support to help staff meet objectives



Link to school priorities:

- Ensure individual goals support broader school/department targets
- Demonstrate how staff contribute to overall school success



Keep admin manageable and time-efficient:

- Use online systems to streamline documentation and reduce administrative burden
- Make appraisal an ongoing process integrated into regular work

Essential tools for productivity and results

Staff never join schools for the paperwork.

It's no surprise, then, that our whitepaper highlights the impact of admin on staff satisfaction.

So, how do you cut through a lot of the red tape or slow processes to make a learning environment feel more like it's focused on young people and their future?

Much of this red tape is important and cannot be ignored, so efficiency is vital.

Remember that 50% of staff surveyed do not have performance management, training and career progression managed in one online system. Of those who did, 77% believe it made a difference.

An example of efficient processes

Lesson plans are one of the biggest pains for teachers. So much time is spent planning the lesson when much of the teacher's gift is in the execution.

One solution is to create a pool of indispensable syllabus-related resources that are re-usable, year after year.

An example of efficient technology

iPads and other tablets mean staff can have a wealth of real-time information at their fingertips. There's no walking back and forth to a computer to dig out information or get updates.

Teachers can instantaneously bring up learning plans and always know what is happening across the school.

The power of democratised data

The democratisation of data across your school or trust can have a considerable impact.

It can drive improvements by providing insights that help staff make strategic decisions. It puts an end to making financial calls based on instinct and engages staff in thinking about continuous school or trust improvement.

This includes:

- Identifying performance metrics
- Spotting trends
- Anticipating problems
- Optimising workflows
- Better resource sharing
- Highlighting areas for improvement.



PART TWO – Picking the right software for your people-powered school or trust

How can software help you with your people-first strategies?

In short, centralised HR software with robust performance management and career development features is a must.

It should handle everything in the staff lifecycle, from the first recruitment ad someone sees to retirement.

What features does it need?

Your software should help you onboard and set **clear goals** for staff, deliver feedback, and support professional growth.

Moreover, it should help everyone make use of the very latest **data**.

It also needs to be **compliance-ready** and stay that way with **regular, seamless updates**.

How to decide on software to support you and your staff

You know what you want, but what questions should you ask so you don't end up with the wrong system?

Top questions to ask your vendor about good HR software:

1. How does your HR software integrate with other essential systems like payroll, finance, and data analytics to streamline operations?
2. How does your software cut down on needless admin tasks – can it reduce time-sapping chores like duplicate data entry?
3. Can your solution provide real-time data insights to help school leaders make informed decisions across multiple departments?
4. What features does your HR software offer to support the management of staff absence and recruitment processes efficiently?
5. How user-friendly is the interface for both HR staff and employees? Are there self-service options available?
6. Does your software include comprehensive compliance management tools, like automated checklists and integration with recruitment systems, to ensure all regulatory requirements are met?
7. How well does your HR system scale and adapt to the needs of multi-academy trusts, including central control and policy consistency across schools?
8. What level of customisation can be applied to the software to meet the unique HR needs of a school or trust?
9. How does your solution handle performance management and professional development tracking to ensure continuous staff improvement?
10. What support and updates do you offer to ensure the HR solution remains current and effective for educational institutions?
11. How does your software support data privacy and security, especially concerning sensitive employee information?



Lead, develop staff and remove the burden of admin with IRIS

Every HR By IRIS works perfectly across every organisation, whether you're a leader deciding strategies or a staff member booking leave.

The ultimate set of HR tools for schools and trusts, this smart, automated platform helps you with:

- **Staff absence management**
- **Recruitment**
- **Training and CPD**
- **Case management**
- **Performance management**
- **Payroll integration**
- **Single central record (SCR)**
- **Document and policy management**



Every HR also:

Fits seamlessly into your system

Every HR works with systems for payroll, and finance and data analytics, streamlining your operations.

Empowers decisions through real-time data

Every HR provides powerful data insights – giving you an in-depth and trust-wide view of staff, departments and the schools they work in. With this insight, Leaders can make informed decisions, spot trends, and take on challenges before they become significant problems.

Delivers an intuitive user experience

The platform is designed to feel second nature to your staff, with easy navigation and self-service capabilities. Unsurprisingly, this saves your back-office staff a lot of time.

Meets your daily compliance challenges

Every HR has an array of compliance management tools, including automated checklists and recruitment system integrations to ensure everything is right first time.

Brings you the full power of the cloud

Take it on the go, ensure staff can communicate with your back-office teams from a phone or tablet and enjoy seamless updates.



[Click here to find out more.](#)



About IRIS Education

IRIS Education has been working with schools for more than 30 years.

We deliver education management solutions that save time, offer a clear view and help you work together – so you can give your pupils the education they deserve.

IRIS provides solutions across finance and budgeting, estate management, HR and payroll, student MIS, and parental engagement.

We are a trusted partner of over 12,000 smarter schools, working with 75% of MATs and more than half of the schools in England, as well as having a presence in over 90 countries worldwide.



[Click here to find out more.](#)



