



# Pastoral care

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**Pastoral care is central in every truly successful school.**

In our role as teachers, we have the utmost responsibility to support, protect and guide the young people in our care to achieve everything they possibly can. Not many staff in schools would disagree with that as a principle. However it is clear that, in the current times, many of us are struggling to uphold our responsibilities as the pressure of attainment and reduced budget builds. We have a plethora of issues to contend with in schools, from the pressure of external influences on our young people, all the way through to the realities and challenges of supporting young carers. The support that we now access is dwindling, as is our time and capacity to manage these key problems. Here, Pete Radcliffe of Longdean School kindly shares with us a range of insights and strategies that they put in place to ensure that their young people achieve everything they should.

*Clare Costello*

## **A CASE STUDY OF PASTORAL CARE, PETE RADCLIFFE, LONGDEAN SCHOOL**

At Longdean we run a vertical tutoring system, whereby pastoral care lies with a head of house rather than a head of year, as is typically the case with a horizontal system. Initially, this did present challenges, given students' natural affiliation to their own year groups and the default instinct to gravitate towards age-related peers. Over time, though, this has lessened and we really don't come across any

grumbles or pleas for a return to a horizontal system anymore. Like any new system, it's really a case of gritting your teeth and working through the bedding-in process.

Once that process has taken place, you begin to see evidence of a more integrated student body. For me, one of the nicest features of the vertical system has been the way in which sixth form students converse with their younger peers on the basis of relationships that were formed in class. This simply wouldn't happen with a horizontal system.

The key to embedding the system properly lies in having a clearly-defined tutor time programme that everybody buys into. Our vertical groups meet for twenty minutes every morning and they undertake a variety of activities during the course of a week. I give our directors of house autonomy in the way they organise their programmes, but there are certain non-negotiables. Typically, a weekly programme will incorporate an assembly, a house quiz, a numeracy quiz, planner signing and anything else that the director of house deems appropriate. It's really important to make sure that the structure is realistic – form time is twenty minutes long and you'll lose the goodwill of colleagues if you just overload them. There is a high level of accountability in following the framework, but we believe strongly in giving form tutors space to talk to their tutees. Whatever changes sweep through education, form time can still be the cornerstone of a positive start to the day. ➤

Research suggests that a fixed registration period does have a positive impact upon attendance, which is why we have stuck with it. Attendance has risen steadily at Longdean over the course of the past four years. I'd love to say that this is down to the existence of some magic silver bullet, but the truth is that it's driven by tight, simple systems and rigour in the way things are followed up. We're lucky to have a fantastic attendance officer, who is the first line of defence in securing good attendance. She responds immediately to any absences, picking up very quickly on the rare cases of truancy that emerge. I've come across some schools that deal with truancy on a case-by-case basis, but to me, it's not an area that you can really tackle without a consistent sanction – in our case, this comes in the form of a Saturday detention.

Beyond the first day response mechanisms, my team is great when it comes to having weekly meetings with our attendance officer for students in their house who fall into the 85-95 per cent attendance category. Having said that, they often dip into the sub-85 per cent bracket, which is my area. My philosophy is that for every child with a below target attendance figure, there needs to be some sort of story to tell. In the case of the least 'at risk' students, it may simply be that their director of house is aware of the fact that they've had a few days off with tonsillitis. As the figures descend, though, you'll find that there is a vast array of meetings, phone calls, letters and other measures that surround each child. It's not an area where you can ever say the job is done; maintaining that rigour around the follow-up is what's important. If it comes to the uncomfortable point where you have to work with the local authority to administer fixed penalty notices (FPNs), then that shouldn't be shirked. Building positive relationships with families is important, but sometimes, parents simply have to be told to get their children into school.

On the positive side, you could say that our vast array of house competitions provides an extra incentive for children to attend school. I'm very lucky to have a great member of staff who oversees inter-house competitions; this year, he has managed to take things to a whole new level. Perhaps in the past, competitions have focused too sharply on sporting endeavour. While this clearly has its place, there are so many other competitive avenues to explore! This



year, we have introduced house speed chess and house online gaming, to name but two. We're also set to see students compete in a house Masterchef competition, with the winning dish set to grace our canteen menu! All of these competitions – as well as tutor time quizzes – contribute towards our annual 'Race to Thorpe Park', where the house with the highest overall points total gets a day off timetable in the summer when they spend a day at Thorpe Park.

We also have a tightly structured behaviour management system, with clear behaviour 'stages' that relate to the scale of each misdemeanour. Stage 1 gives the teacher the scope to use their discretion to deliver, adapt and, if necessary, withdraw sanctions. Once the behaviour progresses beyond stage 1, it is entered into a whole-school system of escalating sanctions. I like the fact that we still allow scope for teachers to be discretionary, but I do think it's important that a structured whole-school system is in place beyond that.

In 2016, we move to a brand new building and with that, we'll be introducing a 'school colours' reward system, which we're really excited about. This will reward excellence in a number of different areas and have the aspirational quality that we're trying so hard to promote – the rewards that come with earning 'full colours' won't be easy to attain! I actually want it to operate outside the parameters of the house system – while house identity is important, whole school identity still comes first.