

# Thought piece – Flexible working: let's jump through the looking glass.

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Evolution is an inherent part of the human condition, and schools can often be revolutionary in the way they introduce and implement changes. Yet 21st century working habits still seem to be stubbornly absent across large parts of our sector. In 2019, more than one quarter of senior leaders said that flexible working requests had been declined in their schools (CooperGibson Research, 2019), and in the Department for Education's Working Lives of Teachers Survey, a minority of teachers and leaders (33%) agreed that flexible working was compatible with a career in teaching: over half (51%) disagreed and 15% were either unsure or neither agreed nor disagreed (IFF, 2023).

The impact of the pandemic was so devastating for so many, but – as is common in all times of crisis – there were also amazing innovations, too. The requirement to work in an agile, dynamic way was one of the key requirements for all school leaders and staff, coupled with a clear requirement to routinely consider the wellbeing and resilience of others, as leaders finely balanced ever-changing models of delivery. In other sectors, there has been a slow movement back to pre-pandemic working habits, yet in state education we appear to have snapped straight back into what we had before we needed to be flexible. Why? As of February 2022, two-thirds (67%) of surveyed leaders said that the COVID-19 pandemic had made no difference to their likelihood of accepting flexible working requests (IFF Research). Yet we only made it through the pandemic by being flexible, often with frustratingly little notice to changes in guidance and policy. Why have we stiffened up so swiftly?

There will be school leaders who point to the rigidity of the school day, the perceived demands and risks of Ofsted, and the challenge of ensuring equality for all. Yet we also know that leaders have huge prerogative and agency over the design of the school day, week and year. Ofsted have, arguably, never been more aware of the need to focus on wellbeing in our schools (the signature of the Chief Inspector on the School Staff Wellbeing Charter is just one example of this), and equality is (and must always be) important, but the pursuit of equity is the true measure of an enabling system. Equality means everyone is treated the same exact way, regardless of differences. Equity means everyone is provided with what they need to succeed.



It would be naïve to not consider the perceived barriers to flexible working. In a 2021 survey, most schools (60%) reported finding it difficult to offer flexible working within their existing school budget (IFF Research, December 2021). Yet, reducing hours actually saves money – it's typically the first step employers make when exploring workforce reduction measures.

If leaders have the power and prerogative to structure the school day/week/year, then flexible working can be an enablement of staff retention, improved staff wellbeing and, dare I say it, greater financial efficiency and a better educational offer. A 2022 survey of parents, pupils, and learners explored their experience or expectations of being taught by job-share teachers. The majority of surveyed parents (62%) reported that this arrangement had either a positive impact or no impact on their child (26% reported a positive impact and 36% reported no impact) (Kantar, 2023). The same study found that parents whose child had experienced a job-share arrangement were less likely to report a number of negative impacts compared with the expectations of parents whose child had not experienced a job-share arrangement.



At a time when we have credible reasons to be worried about the supply of new teachers, we can take action from within our autonomous school system to retain as many as possible, by placing flexible working at the heart of our leadership and management philosophies. IFF Research, (December 2021) found that, for leaders in schools that offer flexible working, the majority agreed that flexible working had a positive impact on overall teacher and leader wellbeing (85%) and productivity (74%), it helped to retain teachers and leaders who might otherwise leave (82%), it helped to reduce absences (58%) and it helped attract a greater number of candidates (53%) and create a more diverse workforce (50%).



Where we have a school in crisis, leaders would desperately lurch for interventions which achieved these outcomes. We need more school leaders to step through the looking glass and see the value of flexible working in maintaining, sustaining and improving our good or better schools.

It's much easier to build a positive mind-set around new working practices in a school, when things are already positive. Clichéd as it is, prevention really is the best cure and in these times when teacher recruitment and retention looks so bleak, we can and should use our much-valued autonomy as a sector to reshape that narrative from within our system, by choosing to be the responsible system leaders we can be. Theodore Roosevelt said that nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, and difficulty. That nicely sums up the miracle of birth (or so my wife tells me!), and leaders can in turn create a new way of working in our schools that is, in and of itself, life-changing for our staff.

#### About the author

Warren Carratt is the CEO of Nexus MAT. The multi-academy trust consists of 16 schools, mostly serving pupils with special educational needs. It has been providing school services from its base in Rotherham since 2016.

## About FWAMS

Flexible Working Ambassador Multi-Academy Trusts and Schools (FWAMS) have been appointed by the DfE to support school and MAT leaders to implement and embed flexible working in schools in their region. FWAMS can offer free practical advice on designing a policy, on overcoming common challenges such as timetabling and budgeting, as well as highlighting the importance of 'flexible hiring'. Find out more by visiting the [FWAMS webpage](#) or by emailing [Flexibleworkingineducation@capita.com](mailto:Flexibleworkingineducation@capita.com)

## Referenced material and further reading

- [Exploring flexible working practice in schools - CooperGibson Research for DfE, 2019](#) (Version updated in 2020)
- [COVID-19 School Snapshot Panel - IFF Research for DfE, December 2021](#)
- [School Workforce Census, 2022](#)
- [What teachers do next after leaving and the implications for pay-setting, NFER, 2022](#)
- [Flexible working in Schools – Exploring the costs and benefits \(IFF for DfE, January 2023\)](#)
- [Working Lives of Teachers Survey; IFF on behalf of Department for Education, 2023](#)
- [DfE guidance on flexible working in schools - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)