



Designing a Workplace That No One Wants to Leave

Positive teacher experience and engagement is crucial for schools to be able to work together and achieve educational aims. **Karen Dempster** and **Stephanie Hill** offer a framework for upgrading your school's teacher experience.

What's your teacher experience?

Great teachers are fundamental to the education system and to our future society. Sadly, the issue of teacher retention and recruitment continues to echo through education media. We hear there is a problem and it is set to get worse based on recent data. Disillusioned teachers are crumbling and leaving the profession due to workload, poor management practices and long periods of negative stress.

But enough of the problems. What can be practically and positively done in schools to create a teacher experience people don't want to leave, and which they actually want to join?

It's time to take a step back and look at the whole teacher experience, starting from the moment a teacher

hears about a job with a school, whether it's the wording of the job advert or what they hear from friends or family.

A truly fantastic teacher experience will save your school recruitment and supply teacher costs and reduce pressure on existing school team members having to cover the gaps. Attracting and retaining great teachers will have a positive impact on the reputation of your school and on the performance of your students.

So, how do you ensure your teacher experience lives up to what your school stands for, every day?

There are 12 stages of the teacher experience, which you can see in the image below. This has been inspired by Dr Emma Kell's book: *How to Survive in Teaching* together with input from many others.¹



It enables your school leadership team to talk through, supported by a self-check list, where you are right now with your teacher experience, recognising what you are doing well and specific areas where you can improve.

1. Attract me

A school leadership team should know how many teachers join their school based on how highly it is recommended as a place to work. This is the first and best indicator of someone believing they have a great experience at work so why not make best use of this data? Every school should have a programme in place that supports and rewards teacher referrals. After all, if you want your school team to recommend your school as a great place to work, and they save you recruitment costs in the process, the least you can do is thank them.

What do those that go through your recruitment experience say about it?

For many, even those who have been recruited, it can be a painful experience, filled with uncertainty. This is a great opportunity to create a recruitment experience that you desire for your team and one that boosts your reputation. Write in such a way to candidates who did not get the job that even though they weren't selected this time, that they still recommend your school or come back for a future role to which they are better suited. It's simply about clear, succinct communications that are carried out in an appropriate and timely manner, and which reflect your values and vision.

2. Energise me

Energise new staff about coming to work at your school before day one. People are usually very enthusiastic to learn prior to starting a new job so it's a great time to share your school's vision and values with them and explain what these mean in the daily life of your school. Why not assign a 'buddy' or member of staff to support the new starter before day one, who they can ask questions to and who will meet them on their first day to avoid some of the usual anxiety? Paint an accurate picture of what they can expect at your school well before they start.

3. Get me started

It's important that there are clear expectations of all staff in terms of behaviour and performance, so new joiners need the same level of guidance right from the outset. It's also important to share what your school can offer to the individual who is joining that goes beyond behaviour and performance, such as where they go for support, how to share ideas and what types of fun events you have on the agenda. Clearly, a new starter needs a warm and genuine welcome on day one from the whole team. You should also have a standard briefing pack and process to guide new starters, so they have all the important information they need to get them started quickly.

4. Guide me

One of the biggest issues when starting a new job can be the ability to access and use technology. This is no different in a school. New starters need the support, coaching or training to get the most from school technology, especially as systems differ from school to school and are not always intuitive! There are several statutory policies and procedures they need to be aware of both in terms of what they are and how these are lived and applied daily so don't assume that pointing a new starter to a page on your website is really guiding them about their data or safeguarding responsibilities.

5. Support me

The ever-present issue of workload is often cited as the main reason why teachers are leaving the profession. There are, however, so many things 'bundled' under this heading. Often 'workload' is driven by what people think is required and the way things have always been done, or the way other schools do it. In your school develop a collaborative and safe environment for everyone to speak out about issues. Encourage them to share ideas to reduce workload that improve efficiency and effectiveness. In doing so your school will become a true learning organisation where people constantly look to improve and are rewarded for doing so.



Ultimately it is the moments that matter where 'people come first' that are the real proof points—those moments where there are personal situations that require support and flexibility, such as attending a funeral or taking a day off in term time. Demonstrating care and empathy for staff will be remembered, not just by those who have the situation but by those around them.

6. Keep me safe

Wellbeing and resiliency in a school does not just happen, schools must prepare and support their staff for and through the multitude of challenging situations that they face every day. If your school is lucky enough to have a specialist member of the team in a 'wellbeing' role, ensure everyone else is equally supportive and that you train your managers to have a positive impact on staff motivation and wellbeing. Simply by having standards in place, such as how often managers are expected to meet with and listen to their team members and giving them clarity about their role and support to be a great manager, can make a big difference. Staff need to know that a school takes their wellbeing seriously.

School team members, particularly teaching staff, will undoubtedly feel pressures at work—it's part of any job and when it is positive, it is a motivational factor. To avoid it becoming excessive and more than can be handled alone, adopt a positive psychology resiliency programme that enables problem solving, self-regulation and adaptability to stress in an environment that provides structure and safety.

7. Inspire me

Central to any great school is its vision and values that are understood, believed and lived by the school team and role modelled by leaders. Every decision and behaviour should build a culture that supports the vision and values, always focusing on what is best for the students.

Teachers often go into teaching because it is a passion and calling, or they have been inspired by those who taught them. They see meaning in their work and are fired up about the difference they can make in the world.

Schools need to create meaningful work that goes beyond grades and league tables. This starts with a great culture that is modelled by the senior leadership team, who create meaning in everything they do. They create inspiration by respecting and valuing the limited time that teachers have outside the classroom. They challenge anything that adds to a heavy workload without there being a direct and positive impact on students.

8. Challenge me

All staff members need to have clear roles, targets and development plans. However, these should be more than tick box exercises for the experience to be a positive one. Career paths, succession plans and support should be in place, based on people's career aspirations and the school's development plan. Be brave and share the latest thinking from other sectors as well as within education. Challenge your school team to bring in best practice from other schools they know and encourage them to share what works well at your school.

9. Appreciate me

Have both formal and informal ways of ensuring teachers know they are appreciated and valued. This can be as simple as a spoken or handwritten thank you, to something much more personal that may relate to something they like to do outside school. Make this part of the DNA of your school where your school team has a habit of thanking each other, something that can quickly create a happy and positive culture. There are also opportunities to encourage staff to recognise each other. This type of recognition can be very powerful in motivating people.

People may not remember what you say but they do remember how you made them feel. So, don't forget the little things such as birthdays or reaching out when someone is ill or has achieved something personally. Make people feel appreciated and valued.

Quite often teachers will hear something about the school's plans or activities from a parent or student. This breaks down trust quickly even if it was wholly unintentional. Always ensure, wherever possible, staff are informed of key messages before students, parents or even the community, especially if it is going to be published in the press. This can be as simple as sending a heads-up email to everyone at the end of a day.



10. Listen to me

Listening properly takes time and can't be taken for granted. Is your school providing enough listening opportunities for your staff to share their ideas, raise concerns and discuss school matters? These should be a mixture of formal events such as meetings, and informal events such as coffee breaks. As a school leader, it's imperative to be visible and available at both, even if this means scheduling time in your diary to do so.

Ask the school team for ideas and then find a way to reward those that make a real difference. Often it is reward enough to see an idea implemented. Asking for ideas and suggestions and then acting on those received is a great way of demonstrating listening, but don't forget those that aren't implemented, and if necessary, provide an explanation of why they can't happen this time.

Listening goes beyond what is being said in formal and informal situations. As a leader you should be listening to your school data such as absence, performance and resignations to understand the experience in your school.

11. Connect me

Teachers should never feel alone or isolated, so it's important they have the tools and technology to work together. There are endless tools and technology that can be used to connect your school team, however, they all need to be coordinated, integrated and understood to ensure they are used fully. Invest time in training middle leaders to support great teamworking. Teamwork and taking the initiative to make positive changes should be visibly recognised. You might like to introduce a little competition in doing so, for example, learning walks aligned with a step challenge as part of a wellness campaign.

12. Remember me

Personal recommendation and what people will say about the experience of working at your school after they have left can have wide ranging impact. Consider just how many people are reached when something negative or funny is posted on social media. Staying in touch with your ex-employees and ensuring you create a leaving experience that is just as good as the experience while working at your school can be extremely important and quite simple to do. With their permission, add them to your alumni communications, ensuring these offer two-way communication opportunities, and

you continue to gather their views, whether that's from new schools or in a life beyond education. Some of them may even wish to return to your school, so keeping them informed is a great way to encourage them to come back when the time is right.

In summary

The concept of an end-to-end employee experience in business isn't a new one. For schools, however, it's generally less planned and therefore the experience is often inconsistent. Taking a holistic view of the teacher experience is an opportunity for your school to stand out from the crowd. Start with vision and values, which must be reflected in the teacher experience outlined above that runs throughout the school, at every interaction, every day. One final point is that while we have talked about a 'teacher' experience, this really should be a whole school experience—for teaching and non-teaching members of the school team.

A practical example of an innovative approach to development

One area that is fundamental to a great teacher experience is a forward-thinking approach to learning and development. And this goes beyond traditional CPD. It is about creating a learning organisation, one that supports learning for everyone in the school and continuously transforms itself.

A great example of this learning and development approach is from Passmores Academy in Essex.

Passmores Academy is located in an area of social deprivation and, according to Ofsted reports, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is above the national average, with approximately one-third of students receiving Free School Meals and/or SEN provision. The academy does not have the strongest results in the area, but this is not what attracts teachers and students to the school, nor what encourages them to stay. With a central focus on developing the whole child and giving every student the opportunity to be successful, between 96–98% of students go on to further education or employment following their final year. The Passmores Experience, for both teachers and students, focuses on encouraging a love of learning that inspires young people to stay in education and teachers to stay in the profession.

The school's professional learning dimension draws upon Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan's notion of professional capital, which sees the collective and individual mechanisms of **human, social** and **decisional** capital as the key drivers for improving schools.² It is also informed by examples from the business sector on building learning organisations, such as those shared by Peter Senge and colleagues in the book, *Schools That Learn*.³ It offers effective ways for organisations to build a system of learning that requires students to be at the heart of this organisational change and inspires learning for all who are part of it. Recently, the school has also incorporated **psychological** capital into its notion of professional capital, drawing upon theory from positive psychology to engage staff and students in learning about their own psychological health and wellbeing to build their capacity for efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience.⁴

Staff in any role in the school community are invited to be involved in professional learning opportunities throughout the year, with an annual residential conference bringing together all staff from the wider cooperative learning community to engage in a variety of learning sessions; some suited to their role and some that focus on school ethos and culture.

For the school, professional learning is driven by four key elements:

A. Striving towards great learning inside (and beyond) every classroom, everyday

The development and learning of both staff and students in the school is encapsulated in the notion that all members of the school community have the opportunity to access the *Passmores Experience*. For staff, this includes a suite of professional learning sessions across the year that are driven by the Teaching & Learning team and three Pedagogy Leaders (excellent classroom teachers who plan, facilitate, and support staff development—an idea drawn from @kevbartle from Canon High School). These opportunities include option strands in CPD sessions, mentoring, coaching, leadership courses, sessions for newly qualified and trainee teachers etc. To support staff in

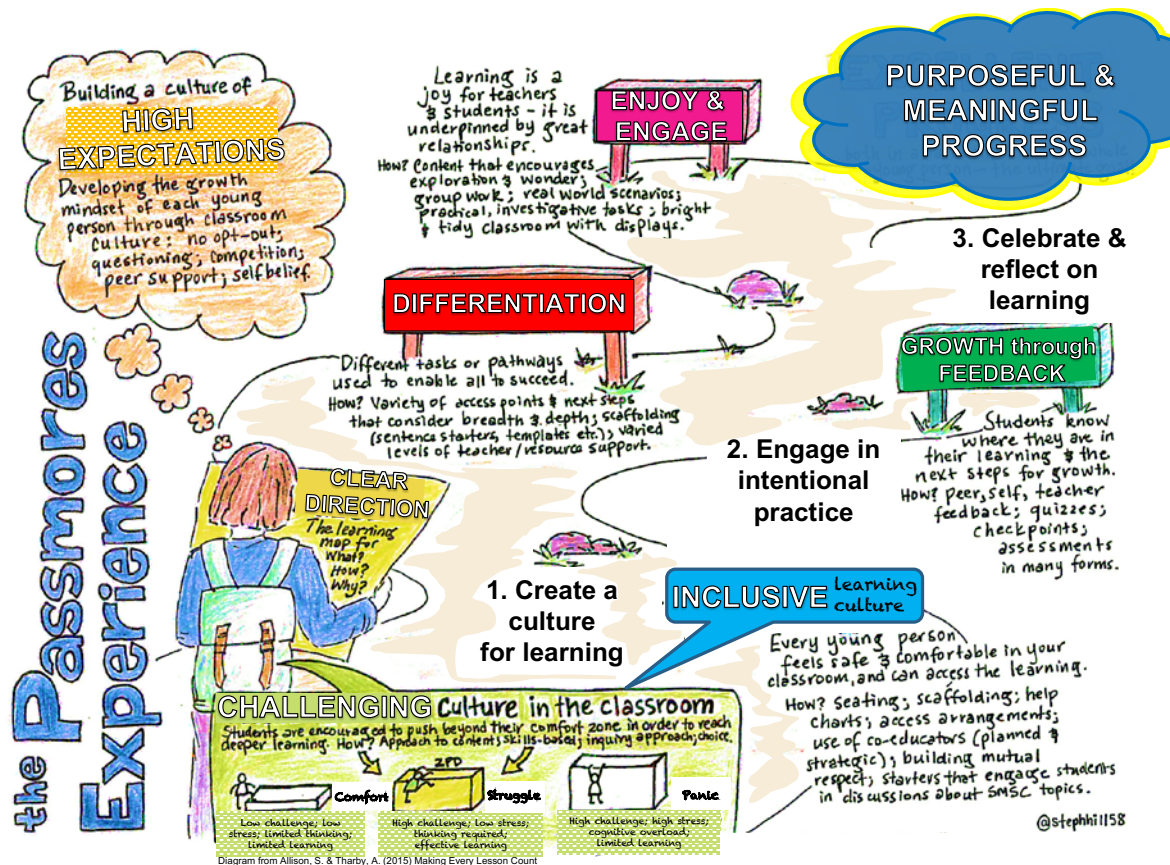


creating an experience for students that goes beyond preparation for exams, the *Passmores Experience* incorporates 8 foundations of great learning that culminate in meaningful and purposeful progress.

B. Reframing the priorities of great teaching and learning

Over recent decades, our performance-focused UK Education system has caused significant damage to how educators perceive great teaching and learning, with a disproportionate focus on 'teaching to test' and covering the syllabus content. In order to reframe these priorities, Passmores decided to learn from those who are at the heart of what we do: the students. Hence the decision to introduce a student learning community (the Passmores Student Pedagogy Team) in 2013. Now in its sixth year, the team includes a small group of students who work alongside teachers to collaborate, discuss and reflect upon the learning in lessons and across the school, with the specific purpose of making their learning more meaningful and engaging. The students collate examples of what they see as great learning, co-plan or conduct action research with teachers, visit lessons and then engage in dialogue about the learning with the teacher afterwards, and in some cases, facilitate 10–15mins lessons to show how a

particular strategy or activity works for them. Not only do students value having a voice in their own learning, but teachers are reminded of all the great things they do for their students and the reason that most went into the profession in the first place: to enable the development and flourishing of the whole child.



C. Conversations about learning

The school moved away from grading lesson observations years ago to encourage professional learning through lesson visits that focused on sustained development rather than judgement. However, the school found that the legacy of performativity frameworks was still affecting the learning experiences of teachers, and feedback sessions were dominated by the visitor 'feeding back' to the teacher. So, the school decided to change the language used in an attempt to also change the practice, and observations became Shared Learning Experiences (SLEs). The purpose of SLEs was to enable both the visitor and the teacher in the classroom to learn from the experience and the feedback that occurred afterwards became co-generative dialogue where both walked away having reflected upon their own practice. Specific training was given for this process and it is still very much a work-in-process, but the change in mindset of staff around their own development is notable.



D. Focus on culture, not individual teachers

Finally, the development of teachers is seen as a community endeavour rather than an individual feat, encouraging teachers to value their part in contributing to the school's culture and success.

For example, department reviews are conducted based upon a 'best practice' model derived from theory on Appreciative Inquiry, which claims that using a strength-based approach to development is far more effective than the traditional deficit-model.⁵ HODs meet with a senior leader to discuss the best practice in their department around four key questions drawn from the school's development plan. Then, after planning with their team, HODs present to their colleagues on this best practice in a session that invites dialogue and reflection



amongst middle leaders. Following this, departments are paired, and every teacher visits a lesson of a teacher in the paired department. Departments meet following this and create a 'best practice' report on their paired department based on what they have experienced. These reports and the examples of best practice are shared in a 'Best Practice' publication at the end of the year. The process aims to build trust, encourage the sharing of knowledge and reflexivity in practice and increase social capital.

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NOTES

- 1 Kell, E. (2018). *How to survive in teaching: Without imploding, exploding or walking away*. London: Bloomsbury.
- 2 Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: Transforming teaching in every school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- 3 Senge, P., Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J., & Kleiner, A. (2012). *Schools that learn*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
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- 5 Lewis, S., Cantore, S., & Passmore, J. (2016). *Appreciative inquiry for change management: Using AI to facilitate organizational development*. London: Kogan Page Publishers.