

## Infinity Academies Trust – Prioritising Pupils’ Mental Health and Wellbeing

Infinity Academies Trust is a small (though expanding) Multi Academy Trust, located in rural Lincolnshire. The Trust was formed in 2016 with two academies, Spilsby and Gipsy Bridge. Since then it has recently welcomed the Great Oaks Federation, made up of St Thomas CE and Wyberton Primary, who will join the Trust on 1 April 2019.

What makes Infinity Academies Trust special is the shared commitment of all its schools to ensure that pupil wellbeing is at the centre of everything that they do. As a result of this ethos, there is innovative and inspirational practice taking place across the Trust in supporting pupils’ emotional and social wellbeing, and developing the ‘whole child’. At the same time, the Trust is careful to ensure that there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to pupil wellbeing, and each school within the Trust is encouraged to meet the specific needs of its own pupils in the best way that it sees fit. This balance between shared vision and commitments, and the opportunity for schools to shape their provision for context (whilst also sharing practice and learning with others) is at the foundation of successful trusts. While the schools all embrace opportunities to embark on joint projects, the sharing of resources, and sharing of best practice, and regularly do so, each school also has its own unique and bespoke approach in supporting their own pupils.

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Sean Westaway, the Chair of Infinity Academies Trust, explains how the health, happiness and wellbeing of pupils became a central aspect of the Trust’s vision and ethos. He tells us, “pupil wellbeing had always been important to our schools, but when we held a Trust Visioning Day led by Forum Strategy, it was an invaluable opportunity for us to clarify our mission and vision. We were able to set our vision statement, ‘Ready to Learn, Prepared to Flourish’, and made pledges to all our pupils.” These pledges included:

- **Happy and healthy:** giving all our children a ‘voice’ so that they can be happy and fulfilled, and giving them the skills to protect both their mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- **Collaborative and connected:** working together to enhance the power of collaboration and partnership, on professional development, research, classroom practice, and therefore children’s learning and outcomes. Use our partnerships to connect our children, parents, staff, leaders and communities to the wider world.

- **Moral purpose:** valuing each child and responding to their needs, so they have the right skills, opportunities, and confidence to ‘be themselves’.

In this case study, we will be looking at some of the most innovative practices taking place across the Trust that enable these pledges to be fulfilled on a daily basis. This includes Spilsby Primary’s focus on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils; the focus at Gipsy Bridge on rights, respect, and diversity; and how the implementation of a Learning Mentor Team at the Great Oaks Federation is successfully supporting pupil wellbeing. The case study, however, will be by no means exhaustive in terms of outlining *all* of the practice taking place across the schools which support the wellbeing of pupils, which entails far more than can be contained in one case study.



### **Spilsby Primary Academy**

Spilsby Primary sums up its vision with the statement, “we want our children to achieve the highest standard possible, not only academically, but emotionally, socially and spiritually.” In order to secure this vision, the school has implemented a wide range of strategies over the past two years to ensure that pupil wellbeing is made a top priority. Headteacher, Andrew Clarke, explains why; “we had a significant number of pupils at Spilsby facing issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and grief and loss, and that’s why we decided that the mental health and wellbeing of our pupils needed to become a key priority for us as a school. It is very difficult for children to make good academic progress if their emotional and social needs go unaddressed, so at Spilsby we have made the decision to take a holistic approach, that meets the needs of the whole child.”

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At every stage of their school journey, pupils at Spilsby take part in activities aimed at developing their emotional and social wellbeing. For example, wellbeing workshops for each year group, provided by Supporting Minds, take place each term. These workshops are designed to support children to identify and understand their emotions better, and to equip them with healthy coping strategies. This learning is always linked to a ‘hands-on’ creative activity, for example, making worry dolls as part of a workshop about anxiety. Penny Cragg, the school’s Family Welfare Officer, explains, “the crafting element of each workshop is important, as when a child takes home what they have made, it can also create an opportunity for their family to have a conversation about mental health and wellbeing.”

As well as termly workshops, every class at Spilsby engages in a daily activity designed to support pupil wellbeing. “Each class has a different approach” says Andrew, “but it is our expectation at Spilsby that every teacher provides a regular activity for their class which supports wellbeing, and this expectation is also part of our appraisal system.” This focus on wellbeing starts at reception level, with lessons on mindfulness, and then, as pupils move in to years 1 and 2, they take part in Yoga. Year 3 write a positive message about one of their peers every day, and year 4 reflect each day on what they have done to fulfil the ‘five aspects of wellbeing’ (connecting with others, taking notice and being mindful, giving to others, being active, and learning). Year 5 write post-it notes on any acts of kindness they have experienced or witnessed around school during the day, and Year 6 do five to ten minutes of peer massage each day after lunch. “Our teachers have all taken part in CPD training on children’s mental health and wellbeing. This has helped them to feel confident in delivering activities linked to wellbeing, and to develop a deeper understanding of the link between a child’s wellbeing and how effectively they can learn”, says Andrew.

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For pupils dealing with specific emotional or social problems, referrals can be made to Penny, the school’s Family Welfare Officer, who can support the child through interventions or one-to-one sessions; referrals can be made by a teacher, a parent, or by the pupil themselves. Professional counselling is also available at the school for pupils who need it, which is provided through Supporting Minds (currently for 6 hours a week, and providing counselling for 6 pupils). “Penny is also completing a diploma in counselling, and once that is completed, we will need to rely much less on external agencies to provide counselling for our pupils, as we will have even more ‘in-house’ expertise”, says Andrew. “That expertise is not just for our benefit, but benefits the Trust as a whole. Penny has already been able to share advice and guidance on supporting a

bereaved child with the Headteacher of Gipsev Bridge, Tracy Cockram, and is happy to offer support to the other schools within the Trust whenever it might be needed.”

Chair of governors, Mel Standbrook, tells us “the results of Spilsby’s focus on mental health and wellbeing are far-reaching. We have had lots of fantastic feedback from parents, and we have also received the Wellbeing in Schools Award from Optimus Education. However, most importantly, we have seen attendance go up, incidents of disruptive behaviour go down, and the positive effects that our strategies and interventions have had on individual pupils, especially those most in need.”

### **Gipsev Bridge**

Gipsev Bridge is a small rural school with under 100 pupils. Headteacher Tracy Cockram has chosen to make an understanding of children’s rights, as well as a deeper understanding of diversity, a key focus for the pupils at the school. Tracy tells us more about the importance of this work at Gipsev Bridge; “as a small school in rural Lincolnshire, we felt that our pupils were not getting enough exposure to the wider world. We wanted to help them to expand their horizons; to understand that diversity should be embraced and celebrated, and that every child should be valued equally”.

This began with pupils across the school learning all about children’s rights. Tracy tells us, “pupils were introduced to the UN’s charter of children’s rights. We discussed these rights, helping them to understand that all children, including themselves, should be listened to, and deserve to be treated with respect, dignity, and fairness. We also discussed why that is so important. Each class reflected upon what we could do in school, as well as what we already do, to uphold these rights, including anti-bullying activities and e-safety awareness. This laid the groundwork for exploring rights and diversity further.”

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Gipsev Bridge take part in a number of programmes which support this learning, including ‘Connecting Classrooms’, ‘E-Twinning’, and ‘Kindred Spirits’. Connecting Classrooms has linked Gipsev Bridge with a school in Lebanon; through this programme the two schools have been connecting through Skype, and taking part in shared activities and projects. The current shared project is called ‘zero waste’, and is focussed on the reduction of plastic waste in the oceans. Similarly, E-Twinning has given pupils at Gipsev Bridge the opportunity to connect with schools in 11 countries across Europe, taking part in mini projects together, and teaching one another about how Christmas and

Easter are celebrated in each country. This has included sending parcels to one another containing handmade cards and other crafts.

Kindred Spirits links the pupils at Gipsy Bridge with children at a school in London. Pupils from the two schools exchange work such as poems, passports, and drawings of the view outside of their windows. Tracy explains “Kindred Spirits has been an opportunity to introduce many of our pupils to a multi-cultural setting, and to city life, for the very first time. It has been really valuable for our pupils to learn about the lives of children of different races and religions, and who live in a very different setting. The pupils have been able to recognise that, despite their differences, they are actually very similar, and enjoy the same kind of things”.

Pupils at Gipsy Bridge are also encouraged to discuss ‘big questions’ each week through ‘GBA Actioneers’ sessions. Topics of discussion have included; ‘should all adults be made to vote?’, ‘how can we reduce air pollution?’, ‘what is equality?’, and ‘what leads to lasting happiness?’. The discussions are often introduced through thought-provoking images, and encourage the children to ask questions and consider issues from different points of view. Tracy tells us, “as GBA Actioneers has developed over time, the children are becoming noticeably more reflective and thoughtful. These activities are also helping them to become more open-minded, and to develop a greater level of understanding and empathy towards others.”

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Gipsy Bridge has achieved the International Schools Award and the Silver Rights Respecting School Award as a result of its focus on diversity and children’s rights. Tracy explains how she believes this work has contributed to the overall wellbeing of pupils at the school; “because of our emphasis on rights, inclusion, and celebrating diversity, every child at the school knows that they are important and valued. As well as this, their views are always listened to and respected. The pupils also know that they need to look out for one another, and treat each other with care and respect. I believe that all of these factors help our pupils to develop a really robust understanding of their own value and self-worth, no matter their strengths, weaknesses, or differences. This in turn helps to build their self-esteem and emotional resilience, and therefore has a positive effect on their mental health in the here and now, as well as laying strong foundations for good mental health in the future too.”



### **The Great Oaks Federation (GOFed)**

“It made perfect sense for the Great Oaks Federation (GOFed) to join our Trust”, says Sean Westaway, “as their ethos fits in seamlessly with the rest of Infinity. Just like the other schools in the Trust, the schools in GOFed approach pupils’ wellbeing in the way that best serves their context, while also having much to share with the other schools in the Trust too. Gavin Booth, the Chief Executive of GOFed, has also recently been appointed as the CEO of Infinity Academies Trust.”

Gavin Booth, explains, “we prioritise our pupils’ wellbeing just as highly as their academic performance, as we know that the two go hand in hand, and that children who are happy, confident, and secure are able to learn better, and are therefore more likely to go on to succeed.” The commitment to pupils’ mental health and wellbeing at GOFed is reflected in its investment in a Learning Mentor Team, made up of 3 full-time members of staff whose sole purpose is to provide pastoral support for pupils across the two schools. This team is led by Cathy Riglin, who is the Senior Learning Mentor and part of GOFed’s Senior Leadership Team. Cathy is a trained children’s counsellor, and is also the only SLE specialising in behaviour and inclusion in Lincolnshire. She tells us, “first and foremost, we have a real emphasis on encouraging our pupils to take responsibility. Pupils across the schools are engaged in high levels of self-regulation, which includes taking on roles such as being playground leaders, organising clubs, being language ambassadors, and taking part in peer support.”

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The playground leaders’ tasks include looking after play equipment, instigating games, resolving playground disputes, and making sure that no one is left out. Pupils running clubs at break time and lunch times take responsibility for organising activities, and clubs

run by pupils include drama, dance, art, colouring and nature. Cathy tells us, “the pupils really step up to the mark, and they learn to take responsibility for themselves and for each other, which is brilliant for increasing confidence and self-esteem, as well as encouraging inclusion. We support them by providing them with child-friendly training in restorative practises and behaviour management.”

Pupils are also given a key role in supporting other pupils, whether that be with a language barrier, or with their behaviour. With such a high proportion of EAL pupils at St Thomas’, and with a total of 12 different languages spoken at the school, a number of pupils have become ‘language ambassadors’, who, alongside the school’s dedicated EAL TA, are paired up with new pupils who speak the same language as themselves. Language ambassadors are able to help new EAL pupils settle in, welcoming them in their own language, and helping them with the transition to speaking in English. “This prevents EAL pupils feeling isolated, and helps with integration and inclusion, which, of course, is really important for their wellbeing”, says Cathy.

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Another way in which pupils are encouraged to support one another is through ‘circle of friends’ interventions. Cathy explains, “if a child is struggling with their behaviour, we address it as a whole class through a discussion of the positives and the concerns. Children can then put themselves forward to form part of a support group of seven children, who meet regularly with the child who is struggling, and together discuss any issues, and what they can do as a group to help. This might include things like one pupil checking in with the child first thing in the morning before lessons for a general chat, or designating a safe space for when the child wants some time alone. This is all through mutual discussion and is never a done-to process, and each session includes a review and new targets. So far, every time we have instigated this kind of intervention it has had really positive results”, says Cathy.

Cathy and her team also have one-to-one sessions with pupils who need them, whether to deal with emotional issues, behaviour issues, or grief and loss. Cathy is trained in cognitive behavioural therapy, and helps children to find healthy ways to express, and cope with, their emotions. Another member of the Learning Mentor team is trained in Lego therapy, which has a range of proven benefits for children encountering difficulties. All of the members of the Learning Mentor Team work in both schools each week, so that all of the children can get to know and feel comfortable with each of them; “this means that children don’t become too reliant on just one individual, and that if a member of the team leaves, there is still continuity for the pupils”, says Cathy.

*Since each school is so strong individually when it comes to supporting pupil wellbeing, I believe that together we will be able to provide pupils with something very special indeed, and I look forward to seeing how the Trust evolves as we move into the future.*

Great Oaks Federation run a pastoral hub annually, during which they share their schools' strategies for supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Gavin explains, "Last year 18 schools attended our hub. We want to help as many pupils as we can across Lincolnshire, so we are generous with our knowledge and our resources. As part of Infinity Trust we will be able to share our best ideas and practice between our schools, and since each school is so strong individually when it comes to supporting pupil wellbeing, I believe that together we will be able to provide pupils with something very special indeed, and I look forward to seeing how the Trust evolves as we move into the future."

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Case Study Completed by Rachael Gacs of Forum Education.