

ARE YOU READY FOR A LOCAL SPIKE?

Harris Federation's response to the pandemic lockdown contains important lessons in health and safety preparedness, says Graeme Holland.

Leicester's lockdown in late June was a stark reminder to schools across the country that the pandemic is far from being in retreat.

Every school leader and teacher will be aware that other lockdowns are a distinct possibility if there are local spikes in infections in the coming months.

The impact of these are all too clear, so having a solid health and safety set-up is an absolute necessity for schools in these covid-haunted times.

Steering through the pandemic has been a huge challenge for all schools and creates significant risks for multi-academy trusts which are responsible for multiple schools.

This is where a strong central team, supported with external expertise, resources and leadership, can come into its own.

That was certainly the case at Harris Federation, one of the largest MATs in the country. The federation, which has 48 primary and secondary academies across London with 36,000 pupils and over 4,000 staff, is a good example of the role a strong central MAT team can play in easing the workload on headteachers, using its central teams and external support to provide strong leadership and guidance.

GUIDANCE

As soon as pandemic started to hit the headlines Harris Federation's central HR and health and safety teams swiftly produced model risk assessment templates based on template risk assessments written by our health and safety experts, summarising the barrage of government advice and guidance.

This quick action meant that headteachers could then review and adapt much more quickly than if they had been working in isolation.

TRAINING

Malcolm Drakes, leadership consultant to Harris Federation, said: "While many individual schools struggled with how to equip their staff, the Harris central teams identified and purchased all the PPE required for all academies, including face masks, antiviral sprays, gloves and infrared thermometers. This was then distributed to schools so that leadership teams could focus on preparing rather than on procurement."

The Harris Federation health and safety and facilities management teams were supported by health and safety consultants who produced more than ten covid-19 school-based updates over this period. These were drawn from the numerous government guidance documents and ensured the Harris team could apply the most current information to the schools.

Staff across the MAT could also access a range of health and safety online training courses, written specially in response to this new way of working.

The wellbeing of staff and pupils has been at the centre of the Harris response to the covid-19 disruption. This included

training to prepare staff to help pupils feel emotionally safe and secure about returning to school, and access to stress management e-learning courses for staff and senior leaders.

The pandemic experience showed that with preparedness, strong leadership and support a large MAT could handle the challenge of the pandemic lockdown confidently.

It has also been an opportunity for learning and the experience will help the federation to develop even stronger systems so that they are ready if there is a local spike in the future.

Malcolm Drakes said: "There will be some lessons that we can draw from our health and safety set up. Having robust online systems that provide easy access to bespoke training provides a model approach to the curriculum and online training that we want for all staff and pupils.

"We have risk assessment templates that can be easily contextualised for a school's needs and we want the same for online learning.

"We're reviewing our business continuation plan and we are planning to create a central bank of online teaching and CPD resources so that we are ready to switch into online learning and staff CPD if we need to."

Graeme Holland is Head of Health and Safety at Judicium Education, a professional services company working with more than 1,200 schools across England, including Harris Federation.
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