



# **POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH FOR SCHOOL LEADERS**

## **POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH**

This series of texts presents a modern and comprehensive set of evidence-based strategies for promoting positive mental health in educational settings. There is a growing prevalence of mental ill-health among the teaching profession within a context of funding cuts, strained services, constant change and an increasing workload. The series recognises the complexity of the issues involved, the vital role that teachers and leaders play, and the current education and health policy frameworks in order to provide practical guidance fully underpinned by the latest research.

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# POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Jonathan Glazzard and Samuel Stones

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# + CONTENTS

**MEET THE SERIES EDITOR  
AND AUTHORS** PAGE VII

**INTRODUCTION** PAGE 01

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**01**

PAGE 05

**Strategies to  
manage your own  
mental health**

**02**

PAGE 19

**Positive  
approaches to  
leadership**

**03**

PAGE 35

**Positive  
approaches to  
management**

**04**

PAGE 51

**Developing  
a mentally  
healthy school**

**05**

PAGE 65

**Developing  
partnerships with  
parents**

**06**

PAGE 81

**Managing school  
inspections**

**07**

PAGE 99

**Working with  
governors and  
other stakeholders**

**08**

PAGE 111

**Managing work-  
life balance**

---

**CONCLUSION** PAGE 123

**REFERENCES** PAGE 125

**INDEX** PAGE 131



# + MEET THE SERIES EDITOR AND AUTHORS

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# + INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that being a school leader is a tough job. You are ultimately accountable for the decisions that you make and it is your responsibility to ensure that your school is effective. Of course, school effectiveness can be defined in different ways by various people. Interpretations of school effectiveness vary between individuals and groups and even across societies. In recent years, particularly in England and other countries across the world, there has been an emphasis on measuring school effectiveness on the basis of narrow academic performance indicators. In some schools this has led to pupils receiving a restricted curriculum which lacks breadth, depth and balance, and teaching that has been directed at driving up examination and test performance.

In England the school inspectorate body, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), has recently revised the school inspection framework to include a greater emphasis on the quality of the school curriculum. The inspectorate has expressed concerns that the emphasis given in previous inspection frameworks to academic attainment has resulted in increased pressure on school leaders and a curriculum which lacks depth. The revised inspection framework consequently places the school curriculum at the heart of the quality of education provided by schools. The framework states that school leaders must:

*construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life.*

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(Ofsted, 2019, p 9)

Although many school leaders will welcome this change, modifications to the school inspection framework inevitably result in increased workload for school leaders. Leaders will need to revise school policies and practices to address all aspects of the revised inspection framework and this can result in significant increases to workload. In addition, changes to the examination system, measures of pupil progress and

revisions to the national curriculum have all resulted in increased workload for school leaders in recent years. Although the education system needs to evolve to meet the needs of society, changes to broader education policy result in instability for school leaders as well as the need to abandon old systems, embrace the changes or risk potential failure. Cuts to school budgets in recent years has resulted in school leaders managing extremely tight budgets. The pressure on schools to join Multi-Academy Trusts has led to significant increases in workload for those schools that have relinquished local authority control. The emphasis on pupil academic performance in recent years has resulted in unethical practices, including off-rolling, extended internal exclusion and specific groups of pupils being disproportionately represented in permanent exclusion statistics. Although we do not support these practices, we recognise that the emphasis on narrow academic performance indicators in school inspections has largely contributed to their occurrence and consequently we welcome the changes outlined in the revised inspection framework.

Leading a school can be a lonely job. Although it is deeply rewarding to have the opportunity to impact on the lives of so many pupils, their families and community, it can also be isolating. Headteachers rarely receive praise, yet they spend a great deal of their time praising other people. School leaders may also have to spend disproportionate amounts of time supporting colleagues professionally and personally, particularly if personal issues start to detrimentally impact on their work. We would like to think that no school leader relishes having 'difficult conversations' with colleagues and that their motivations for becoming a school leader are not related to power or status. Most school leaders have a clear moral purpose. They are motivated by having a wider impact on the life chances of pupils and wish to develop teachers to become the very best that they can be. However, sometimes it will be necessary to challenge colleagues and have 'difficult conversations', particularly in cases where practice is weak. This process can be just as stressful for school leaders as it is for the member of staff concerned and these situations can very quickly snowball, particularly if teaching unions become involved.

As a school leader, your colleagues will not always like you but they will respect you for making well-considered decisions in your leadership role. They will also respect you for your decisive leadership qualities. Essentially, they need someone to steer the ship. You don't necessarily take on a leadership role to be liked, or to make easy decisions. Ultimately, you have to do what you feel is right for the school and for

the pupils, and your decisions should always be underpinned with a clear rationale.

This book examines the issue of mental health for school leaders. It provides practical advice on how to stay mentally healthy in your leadership role and emphasises the importance of self-care. It provides evidence-informed strategies that will support you in your role and comprehensive advice on how to lead a mentally healthy school. It may not answer all your questions but it opens up a conversation about the importance of looking after your mental health as a school leader. We hope that you will find it helpful.

*Jonathan Glazzard and Samuel Stones*



# + CHAPTER 1

## STRATEGIES TO MANAGE YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH



### PROFESSIONAL LINKS

**This chapter addresses the following:**

- 📍 Education Support Partnership (ESP) (2018) *Teacher Wellbeing Index*. London: ESP

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights some statistics in relation to school leadership and mental health. It explores possible motivations for seeking out a leadership role and outlines some of the challenges that you may experience as a school leader. The chapter provides some practical strategies to support you in overcoming these challenges and it interrogates and explores resilience as a concept that is critical both to school leadership and your effectiveness as a school leader. Additionally, the chapter considers a range of research and literature to develop your understanding of what resilience is and demonstrates how your understanding of resilience can be challenged and contested.

## CONTEXT

The Teacher Wellbeing Index (ESP, 2018) demonstrates that the prevalence of poor mental health continues to rise among senior leaders. The research demonstrates that senior leaders' commitment and selflessness is resulting in this group failing to seek help when it is most needed. It also argues that increasing demands and expectations within our current education system are further exacerbating these instances of poor mental health. The Teacher Wellbeing Index (ESP, 2018) found that 80 per cent of senior leaders described themselves as stressed and 35 per cent of senior leaders felt that taking time off work due to mental health symptoms would have a negative effect on working relationships with colleagues. Additionally, the research indicates that 56 per cent of senior leaders felt that their personal relationships had suffered as a result of psychological, physical or behavioural problems at work. Given the significance of these statistics it is absolutely crucial that more is done to protect school leaders and support them to manage their own well-being. This will enable school leaders to continue to support their school and its staff while maintaining and prioritising their own well-being and positive mental health.

A summary of the key findings from the Teacher Wellbeing Index is given below.

- + 80 per cent of senior leaders responded they were stressed, compared to 64 per cent of teachers.
- + Senior leaders were more likely than teachers to cope with workplace stress or anxiety by turning to food or alcohol.

- + Senior leaders worked much longer hours than they were contracted to do – only 5 per cent were contracted to work 51+ hours per week and yet 59 per cent did so.
- + Senior leaders were more likely to suffer from symptoms of poor mental health than teachers or professionals working in other roles.
- + The largest increase in signs of depression was from senior leaders, which rose from 25 per cent in 2017 to 40 per cent in 2018.
- + Senior leaders were more likely than teachers and staff working in other roles to have experienced behaviour and physical symptoms.
- + Senior leaders were more likely than those in teaching or other roles to have considered leaving – 63 per cent, compared with 58 per cent and 49 per cent, respectively.

(ESP, 2018)

## **THE MORAL PURPOSE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

School leaders might have their own motivations for seeking out a leadership role. Although some may be financially motivated or motivated by status, most are motivated because they want to have a greater impact on young people's education and life chances. Effective leaders tend to have a clear moral purpose. They want to develop great teachers and great schools but ultimately they want to maximise the educational achievements of young people, regardless of social background or other circumstances.

Having a clear sense of moral purpose in terms of what they are trying to achieve can help school leaders to be resilient, even when they are faced with challenging situations within their professional contexts. Most school leaders believe that all pupils can achieve to a good level with access to high-quality teaching, support and encouragement. Through transmitting their values to all staff, they motivate and inspire their colleagues so that a shared sense of moral purpose develops across the school.

Effective school leaders can demonstrate hope, even when faced with challenging circumstances. In addition, they can transmit this hope to colleagues in school and to pupils. This is particularly important if the school has experienced a period of turbulent leadership characterised by frequent leadership turnover. Repeated failure or demonstrating loss

of hope by previous leaders can result in low staff morale. Within the contexts of challenging schools, the key role of a school leader is to instil hope in every member of the school community.

## REFLECTION

- + Reflect on why you became a school leader. What motivated you and what is your moral purpose?
- + Reflect on the type of leader you are. Do you use a single approach to leadership, or do you use a combination of leadership approaches and what is your rationale for this? How you think your colleagues would describe you as a leader?

## THE CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

School leadership is a challenging role. All school leaders recognise this, and no school leader expects a leadership role to be easy. Challenges can come from staff, pupils, parents and other bodies to which the leader is accountable.

Colleagues in school may present you with a range of challenges. You may be required to address competency issues in colleagues, and this can be stressful both for them and for you. Although your first response is to offer support, advice and to provide professional development, ultimately if a colleague's competency remains a cause for concern you may find yourself having to have difficult conversations with them. Managing difficult conversations is tricky and they can be stressful for school leaders, particularly those who are new to the role. You should expect that colleagues may become emotional in these situations and although it is important to acknowledge how they are feeling, it is also important to focus on what you expect the key outcomes of the meeting to be. Strategies to help you manage difficult conversations include:

- + mentally rehearsing the conversation prior to the meeting;
- + establishing a clear agenda for the meeting;
- + demonstrating sensitive listening by acknowledging the emotions that are displayed;
- + presenting the evidence to support your case;

- + agreeing together the best way forward;
- + emphasising that any criticisms are not personal.

As a school leader, your primary role is to lead on aspects of school improvement. Your main priority is the pupils and you may need to implement changes to policies and practices to secure rapid improvements. Some staff may resist change for various reasons. However, they are less likely to resist change if they understand exactly what you are trying to achieve and why it is necessary. In addition, they are more likely to support the change if they have been involved in planning the change so that they are given some ownership of the process. You will need to keep staff fully informed throughout the process of implementing change. It is also useful to celebrate aspects of good practice throughout the journey of the change and to empower staff by asking them to lead on specific initiatives. One thing that will certainly annoy colleagues is 'change for the sake of change'. This often occurs when there are frequent changes to a school leadership team and new leadership teams disband everything and bring in their own policies and practices simply to 'put their own stamp on things'. Constant changes can leave staff feeling unstable and exhausted, so it is better to focus on introducing fewer changes rather than introducing lots of changes all at the same time. It is also important to remember that changes do not need to happen overnight, unless of course there are reasons why this needs to happen. Staff may feel more comfortable if changes are gradually phased in rather than adopting a 'big bang' approach.

Other challenges associated with working with staff include situations where colleagues may be experiencing personal difficulties. They may be experiencing difficulties relating to their health or problems relating to their family or personal relationships. Obviously, you will need to be supportive in these situations and in cases where personal difficulties are impacting on a colleague's professional role, you will need to address this sensitively by finding mutually agreeable solutions. Sometimes colleagues just need the pressure lifting from them for a short period so that they can cope. They might need temporary adjustments to their timetable to help them manage personal situations. The key thing is for you to get to know your colleagues by building a positive relationship with them. If they trust you then they are more likely to come to you for support.

Pupils may present a range of challenges. They may be experiencing difficulties in relation to their schoolwork or their personal lives. As a leader, it is important that you know your pupils individually. If you work in a large school, then you will need to develop mechanisms which enable staff to inform you about pupils. The most effective school leaders are

those who focus on the issues 'on the ground'. Although it is important to be visionary and to work strategically from time to time, you will not harness a great deal of respect from colleagues or pupils if you remain aloof. Spend as much time as you can getting into classrooms. Talk to teachers about the challenges they are experiencing daily. Talk to pupils. Get to know them. Learn their names. Let them know that you are there for them. These basic tasks will earn you a significant amount of credibility and enable you to do your job better. Effective leadership should not be about sitting in an office all day completing paperwork. Although this is often the reality for many school leaders, it should be resisted because it can detach you from the realities of everyday life in schools.

Most school leaders find challenges from parents extremely stressful. Often, they feel obligated to defend their colleagues against parental complaints or they view the complaints as a personal attack aimed at them. Parental complaints tend to arise out of genuine concern, but parents can be misinformed about situations. Establishing clear policies relating to each aspect of school life will provide you with a reference point, particularly if a policy has not been upheld. It is important to stay calm during these meetings. A useful model to follow is:

- + listen to the parent;
- + acknowledge their perspectives;
- + talk with the parent;
- + explain from your perspective the situation as it stands;
- + review the situation with the parent and agree solutions.

Challenges from parents can be particularly stressful if parents take their complaint to the chair of governors, the local authority, to the executive leaders or to Ofsted. In these situations, although the complaint will be investigated, provided that you have followed the policies of the school, local authority or Multi-Academy Trust, then there is nothing for you to worry about. In these situations, it is essential to arrive at a resolution as quickly as possible for the benefit of all parties.

## REFLECTION

- + Within your own professional context, what challenges have you faced and how did you overcome them?
- + Reflect on whether you might have addressed these differently with the benefit of hindsight.

## + CONCLUSION

This book has outlined some of the challenges that you will experience as a school leader. It has emphasised that although your role is important, you must practise self-care to enable you to thrive in your professional role. Participating in relaxation techniques and physical activity may help some school leaders to cope with the challenges of their job by providing essential 'down time' but they are not the solution for everyone. We have emphasised the importance of developing and sustaining social connections with partners, family members and friends so that you have access to social support networks which will help you to be resilient during challenging times. There will be times during your career when you need to draw on these networks more, particularly when you are experiencing professional challenges in your role.

Although physical activity, relaxation and social connections are important for your overall well-being, we have emphasised the need for high-quality professional coaching and external supervision for school leaders. These strategies are evidence-based. External supervision is used in health and social care related professions but it is not common in education. This book has argued that professional supervision is essential for school leaders because they make difficult and sometimes life-changing decisions on a daily basis. Having access to an external and professionally trained supervisor who you can talk to on a regular basis about those decisions can make all the difference. We have argued that professional supervisors and coaches should not be involved in any way in your performance management and should be external to the school.

Being a school leader is challenging but it is also important to remember that it is a privilege. It provides you with an opportunity to make a greater impact on the lives of pupils and teachers. It allows you to enact your moral values, improve the life chances of many pupils and leave behind a legacy. It is a tough and sometimes lonely job, but it is a job that is deeply satisfying and rewarding. There will be highs and lows and the intention of this book is to provide you with some strategies to 'ride' those lows. The job is tough but you have worked hard to achieve

your position. You will experience days when you question whether the job is right for you, whether it is all worth it and you might question what else you can do. However, you will also experience days which are deeply rewarding and it is those times that you need to hold on to. You may be a total inspiration to many. Accept that but remember and hold on to your moral purpose. Never lose sight of why you became a school leader and never forget that you are entitled and fortunate to be there.

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# + INDEX

## **+ ACCOUNTABILITY**

financial 104  
line managers 104–5  
to stakeholders 100

## **+ ARIAS, A E 15**

## **+ BULLYING AND HARASSMENT, PROTECTION FROM 96**

## **+ BUSINESS MANAGERS 104**

## **+ CHANGE**

increased workload due to 1–2  
introduction of school improvements 9  
management of 45  
parents and 68–9, 77–8  
resistance to, managing 46–7, 60–2

## **+ CHILLER, P 12**

## **+ COACHING 13**

## **+ COE, R 94, 95**

## **+ COLLEAGUES**

bullying and harassment, protection from 96  
change introduction 9  
communication with 74–5  
difficult conversations with 2, 8–9  
empowerment and development of 25–6  
management of 38–40  
personal difficulties of 9  
personal time of, respect for 112  
training for 59  
work-life balance of, managing 114–19  
workload of, management of 44–5

## **+ COMPLAINTS FROM PARENTS 10, 67–8**

## **+ CRISP, B 12**

## **+ CULLAJ, S 72–3**

## **+ CULTURE, POSITIVE SCHOOL**

anxiety and stress among teachers 54–6  
collaboration with other schools 63  
curriculum, mental health embedded in 57–8  
difficult conversations with colleagues 60–2

leadership of mental health 53  
listening culture 53  
mental health of teachers 54–6  
monitoring and evaluation of pupils' mental health 59–60  
needs, mental health, identification of 62  
policies, mental health embedded in 56  
promotion of 52–3  
surveillance culture 56  
training for staff 59  
values 52

## **+ CURRICULUM**

LGBT curriculum introduction 14  
mental health embedded in 57–8  
planning 116–17  
quality of 94  
resources 117  
revised inspection framework 1–2

## **+ DATA MANAGEMENT 117–18, 121**

## **+ DAY, C 23, 31, 93, 106**

## **+ DECISION-MAKING**

headteachers' role in 2–3  
impact of decisions 100

## **+ DESFORGES, C 76**

## **+ DEVELOPMENT**

meeting other school leaders 28  
in mental health 59  
planning 107  
research culture in schools 31–2  
of teachers 25–6

## **+ DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES 2, 8–9, 60–2**

## **+ DODGE, R 54**

## **+ EDUCATION SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP 54–5**

## **+ EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOLS, INTERPRETATIONS OF 1**

## **+ ELLE, A 15–16**

## **+ ELLIOTT, V 116**

## **+ EMAIL, COMMUNICATION VIA 74–5, 118**

## **+ EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP 23–4**

## **+ EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS 25–6**

## **+ ENGLISH AS ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE, PUPILS AND PARENTS WITH 70**

## **+ EVALUATION OF PUPILS' MENTAL HEALTH 59–60**

## **+ EVIDENCE FOR INSPECTIONS, TYPE AND PRESENTATION OF 83–5**

## **+ EXAM STRESS 57**

## **+ FEELINGS, MANAGING 24**

## **+ GLAZZARD, J 120–1**

## **+ GOLEMAN, DANIEL 24**

## **+ GONZALES, L 33**

## **+ GOODALL, J 77**

## **+ GOSSIP, AVOIDANCE OF 39–40**

## **+ GOVERNANCE, SCHOOL**

core functions of governors 101, 109  
effective governing bodies 103  
meetings, preparation for 102–3  
Teaching and Learning Toolkit 108

## **+ GRANTHAM, R 55**

## **+ GREENFIELD'S MODEL OF RESILIENCE 29–30**

## **+ GU, Q 93**

## **+ HEADTEACHERS**

challenges facing 106  
decision-making role 2–3

- difficult conversations with colleagues 2, 8–9  
 as isolating role 2  
 paucity of literature on effectiveness 13–14  
 prevalence of poor mental health 6–7
- + HEALTH, PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND MENTAL 119–20**
- + HESLIN, P A 14**
- + HOPE, DEMONSTRATING IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS 7–8**
- + IMPROVEMENT PLANS 86–7**
- + IMPROVEMENTS TO SCHOOLS**  
 change introduction 9  
 plans 86–7  
 strategies for 93  
 see also change
- + INSPECTIONS**  
 evidence, type and presentation of 83–5  
 managing 87–8  
 outstanding schools, challenges of 89–90  
 preparation for 82–5  
 revised framework 1–2  
 school culture 96  
 school improvement plans 86–7  
 schools requiring improvement, challenges of 91  
 self-evaluation forms 86  
 special measures, challenges of 91–2  
 stress management 89  
 vision 83
- + KEATING, L A 14**
- + LAWTON-SMITH, C 16**
- + LEADERS OF SCHOOLS SEE HEADTEACHERS**
- + LEADERSHIP, SCHOOL**  
 challenges of 8–10  
 characteristics of effective 21–4, 94–5  
 defined 20–1  
 dimensions of effective 31, 106  
 emotional intelligence 23–4  
 management tasks and 37–8  
 meeting other school leaders 28, 48  
 of mental health 53  
 moral purpose of 7–8  
 personal efficacy 23–4
- professional supervision 28  
 research culture in schools 31–2  
 risk-taking in 23  
 seven habits of effective school leaders 33  
 style of leadership 61  
 success in 46  
 vision 20–1  
 well-being, own, looking after 26–8  
 see also resilience
- + LEARNING**  
 sequencing 116–17  
 structuring over time 95
- + LEDESMA, J 15, 16**
- + LEITHWOOD, K 42, 46**
- + LGBT CURRICULUM INTRODUCTION 14, 73–4**
- + LIEBENBERG, L 14**
- + LINE MANAGERS 104–5, 106–7**
- + LISTENING CULTURE 53**
- + LIVE MARKING 114, 119**
- + LOW DOG, T 14–15**
- + LUTHANS, F 15**
- + MANAGEMENT, POSITIVE APPROACHES TO**  
 challenges of management 37–8  
 change management 45  
 defining management 36  
 delegation of tasks 36–7  
 leadership and 37–8  
 meeting other school leaders 48  
 people management 38–40  
 resistance to change, managing 46–7  
 social media groups 48  
 staff workload, management of 44–5  
 supervisors, managing yours 40  
 workload management 40–1, 42–3
- + MARKING**  
 live 114, 119  
 online quizzes 115  
 research findings 116  
 work-life balance and 114–16
- work sampling 114–15
- + MAXWELL, BRONWEN 32**
- + MEETINGS**  
 with other school leaders 28, 48  
 school governance, preparation for 102–3  
 staff 118
- + MENTAL HEALTH, POOR, PREVALENCE OF AMONG HEADTEACHERS 6–7**
- + MENTORING 13**
- + MOBILE PHONES, PARENTS AND 72**
- + MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF PUPILS' MENTAL HEALTH 59–60**
- + MORAL PURPOSE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP 7–8**
- + NEEDS, MENTAL HEALTH, IDENTIFICATION OF 58, 62**
- + OBJECTIVES 11**
- + OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (OFSTED)**  
 revised inspection framework 1–2  
 see also inspections
- + ONLINE QUIZZES 115**
- + OPTIMISM IN BUILDING RESILIENCE 23**
- + OUTSTANDING SCHOOLS, CHALLENGES OF 89–90**
- + PARENTS**  
 achievement of students and 77  
 benefits of partnerships with 66–7, 76  
 challenges from 10, 67–9  
 change and 68–9, 77–8  
 communication with 72–3, 74, 75  
 complaints from 10, 67–8  
 consultation with 68–9  
 English as additional language 70

expectations of, managing 74–5  
lack of consultation with 77–8  
literacy of 71  
with mental health needs 70–1  
mobile phones and 72  
reading standards, improving 76  
relationships education and 73–4  
special educational needs and disabilities, pupils with 69–70  
strengthening of partnerships with 76–7  
technology and 71

**+ PATERSON, A 55**

**+ PEARSALL, P 15**

**+ PEOPLE MANAGEMENT  
38–40**

difficult conversations with colleagues 2, 8–9

**+ PERFORMANCE  
MANAGEMENT 104–5, 108**

**+ PERSONAL EFFICACY IN  
SCHOOL LEADERSHIP 23–4**

**+ PERSONAL LIFE,  
ISSUES IN 105**

**+ POLICIES**

marking and feedback 114–16  
mental health embedded in 56  
Ofsted inspections 83

**+ PRIORITIES,  
CHANGING 104–5**

**+ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

meeting other school leaders 28  
in mental health 59  
research culture in schools 31–2  
of teachers 25–6

**+ PROFESSIONAL  
SUPERVISION 12, 28**

**+ REFLECTIVE PRACTICE,  
VIDEO ENHANCED 55**

**+ RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION,  
PARENTS AND 73–4**

**+ REQUIRE IMPROVEMENT,  
SCHOOLS THAT,  
CHALLENGES OF 91**

**+ RESEARCH CULTURE IN  
SCHOOLS 31–2**

**+ RESILIENCE**

application of 14  
as characteristic of effective leadership 23  
definitions of 14–15  
four-cycle phase 15  
as fuel 16  
Greenfield's model of 29–30  
LGBT curriculum introduction 14  
literature on 14–17  
moral purpose of school leadership 7  
optimism in building 23  
recovery 15  
sustainability 15  
thriving on stress and challenges 15–16  
values and 16  
work-life balance 112

**+ RESISTANCE TO CHANGE,  
MANAGING 46–7, 60–2**

**+ RISK-TAKING IN SCHOOL  
LEADERSHIP 23**

**+ ROFFEY, S 55**

**+ ROSE, A 120–1**

**+ SAMMONS, P 93, 106**

**+ SCHOOL CULTURE, POSITIVE**

anxiety and stress among teachers 54–6  
collaboration with other schools 63  
curriculum, mental health embedded in 57–8  
difficult conversations with colleagues 60–2  
leadership of mental health 53  
listening culture 53  
mental health of teachers 54–6  
monitoring and evaluation of pupils' mental health 59–60  
needs, mental health, identification of 58, 62  
policies, mental health embedded in 56  
promotion of 52–3  
surveillance culture 56  
training for staff 59  
values 52

vision 52

**+ SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS,  
INTERPRETATIONS OF 1**

**+ SCHOOL GOVERNANCE**

core functions of governors 101, 109  
effective governing bodies 103  
meetings, preparation for 102–3  
Teaching and Learning Toolkit 108

**+ SCHOOL IMPROVEMENTS**

change introduction 9  
plans for 86–7  
see also change

**+ SCHOOL LEADERS SEE  
HEADTEACHERS**

**+ SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

challenges of 8–10  
characteristics of effective 21–4, 94–5  
dimensions of effective 31  
emotional intelligence 23–4  
empowerment and development of teachers 25–6  
meeting other school leaders 28, 48  
moral purpose of 7–8  
personal efficacy 23–4  
professional supervision 28  
research culture in schools 31–2  
risk-taking in 23  
seven habits of effective school leaders 33  
success in 46  
vision 20–1  
well-being, own, looking after 26–8  
see also resilience

**+ SELF-CARE 11, 26–8**

see also well-being

**+ SELF-EVALUATION FORMS  
FOR INSPECTIONS 86**

**+ SELF-REPORTING TOOLS 58**

**+ SENIOR LEADERS SEE  
HEADTEACHERS**

**+ SEQUENCING  
LEARNING 116–17**

**+ SEVEN HABITS OF EFFECTIVE  
SCHOOL LEADERS 33**

**+ SOCIAL MEDIA**

communication via 75  
groups 48

**+ SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL  
NEEDS AND DISABILITIES,  
PUPILS WITH 69–70**

**+ SPECIAL MEASURES,  
CHALLENGES OF SCHOOLS  
IN 91–2**

**+ STAKEHOLDERS**

accountability to 100  
business managers 104  
consultation with 21  
governors 101–3, 108  
line managers 104–5, 106–7  
see also parents

**+ STUDENTS**

challenges presented by 9–10  
getting to know students  
9–10  
as mental health  
champions 54  
monitoring and evaluation of  
mental health 53, 59–60

**+ STYLE OF LEADERSHIP 61**

**+ SUPERVISION,  
PROFESSIONAL 12, 28**

**+ SURVEILLANCE CULTURE 56**

**+ TARGETS 104–5**

**+ TEACHER WELLBEING  
INDEX 6–7**

**+ TEACHERS**

anxiety and stress  
among 54–6  
bullying and harassment, pro-  
tection from 96  
change introduction 9  
communication with 74–5  
difficult conversations  
with 2, 8–9  
empowerment and develop-  
ment of 25–6  
management of 38–40  
mental health of, research  
on 120–1  
personal difficulties of 9  
personal time of, respect  
for 112  
prevalence of poor mental  
health 6–7  
promotion of positive mental  
health 54–6  
training for 59  
work-life balance of,  
managing 114–19  
workload of, management  
of 44–5

**+ TEACHING, QUALITY OF 94**

**+ TECHNOLOGY**

mobile phones, parents and 72  
parents and 71  
social media 48

**+ 'TO-DO' LISTS 11**

**+ VALUES**

resilience and 16  
whole school culture,  
positive 52

**+ VIDEO ENHANCED  
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE 55**

**+ VISION**

inspections 83

in school leadership 20–1  
whole school culture,  
positive 52

**+ VODICKA, D 33**

**+ VORHAUS, J 77**

**+ WELL-BEING**

health, physical, social and  
mental 119–20  
own, looking after 26–8  
scale 59

**+ WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

change management  
and 115–16  
communication with staff 118  
curriculum planning 116–17  
data management  
117–18, 121  
managing own 112–13  
marking and feedback 114–16  
of other staff,  
managing 114–19  
right to 11  
well-being and 26–8

**+ WORK SAMPLING 114–15**

**+ WORKLOAD**

curriculum planning 116–17  
data management  
117–18, 121  
live marking 114  
marking and feedback 114–16  
online quizzes 115  
organising and managing 11,  
40–1, 42–3  
of staff, management of 44–5,  
75, 114–19  
teachers', reducing, well-being  
and 55–6  
work sampling 114–15

**+ ZANTRUA, A 15**