



Academi Genedlaethol ar gyfer
Arweinyddiaeth Addysgol Cymru
National Academy for
Educational Leadership Wales

A new approach utilising old values



Meet the Author

Russell Dwyer is head teacher at St Thomas Community Primary School; a community school of around 430 pupils, situated next to the SA1 development in Swansea. The school also has a Flying Start setting and hosts many community benefits, such as Health Visitors, a public library, a multi-purpose sports hall, community changing rooms, a community room and a variety of drop ins.

Russell greatly values parental and community engagement and believes that supporting everyone's well-being, especially that of our most vulnerable families, is paramount. He has recently succeeded in bringing 'Operation Encompass' to Swansea, ensuring that schools are aware of domestic incidents promptly so that they can offer support where necessary.

I never dreamed there would come a day when I would close our school indefinitely and say that it was no longer the safest place for our children and staff. However, I find myself, like head teachers all over the world, in that unimaginable scenario right now.

The last few weeks have called on a new approach to leadership. One that has needed to be more assertive, decisive and analytical than it has ever needed to be in headship. Discussions around feedback and curriculum were replaced by quick fire decisions on staffing capacity, safe ratios, social distancing and vital risk assessments. Guidance that we as leaders would normally look to was not immediately there for these new and ever changing situations, and decisions we had to make in its absence took on a completely new level of importance.

There is one thing that has not changed though, to my mind, and that is the trust needed in a school community. Trust, between staff, middle leaders, governors, parents, children and myself has always been important but now more so than ever. In addition, I believe an honest approach to leadership, with trust weaved into every layer of the organisation, helps people to accept difficult decisions when leaders have to make them

Existing trust and honesty in any school community helps reassure everyone that those making decisions do so with the best intentions, even if everyone does not fully understand or agree from their own, individual perspective.

There is no 'school' in the old sense of the word now, but we have a strong 'school family' in St Thomas, one that is supporting its members in innovative ways. Whether that is through the staff in our emergency childcare setting, whom I have never been prouder of; or the volunteers delivering FSM food bags; or the teachers posting weekly learning challenges, or the staff members providing support to parents when they just need a friendly ear. Online communication is key to staying connected now and the Welsh Government's investment in Hwb is paying huge dividends; it is indeed something the nation should be proud to have.

While teaching and learning continues, albeit in virtual ways, frankly, I do not see it as our main purpose right now. Our ability to stay in contact and to reassure those around us is what must take priority. Keeping people safe, reassured and connected is more important than lessons and assessments and arguably these things have always been more significant.

On the last day of school, I told families that our school may be closing but we would not go away and that is a promise I intend to keep. Things will undoubtedly change after this unsettling period in history; many things hopefully for the better, but the concept of community will continue, as will the need for trust and honesty within that community.

Thankfully, what this national crisis has shown is that the education profession can be trusted and we must continue to value what this essential workforce can offer, even beyond this crisis.

Further information and resources can be found at
www.nael.cymru