



POST-PANDEMIC HEALTH AND SAFETY WHAT SCHOOLS SHOULD DO NEXT

By Scott Crichton, Principal Health & Safety Consultant at WorkNest

For the last 18 months, school leaders have, rightly so, devoted the majority of their time to navigating a constantly evolving situation. They have remained resilient, faced new challenges and done an incredible job of juggling COVID compliance with students' educational needs – even receiving praise from the HSE for their efforts.

However, with a new academic year fast approaching, the time has come for schools to refocus their attention on other governance-critical areas, namely regular health and safety management.

Blinkered thinking

With new government guidance emerging frequently – often at very short notice – it's understandable that schools may have developed tunnel vision, becoming hyper-focused on COVID-19.

All elements of health and safety management are important, and school leaders cannot afford to 'drop any balls'. As John Armstrong once said, "You don't ask a juggler which ball is highest in priority. Success is to do it all".

In the 2021/22 academic year, school leaders must pay attention not just to COVID-19 but to all areas of school governance to ensure the required standards are maintained. During the pandemic, many leaders have understandably struggled to see the wood for the trees; however, with the vaccine roll out, there's cautious optimism that normality is returning.

So, what areas do school leaders need to focus on this year?

Changing the mindset

Supporting schools on a daily basis, my experience is that, where there's direct application to children's learning, staff do it; if there's no direct correlation (as is the case with certain areas of health and safety), these areas sometimes don't get actioned.

School staff must stop seeing health and safety as an unnecessary burden, or an adjunct to their role; it must become engrained within the learning environment. After all, a safe and healthy environment – for both staff and students – is fundamental to educating children.

'Because of COVID'

We often hear this phrase as a reason why something hasn't been done. During the recovery phase, it's possible that school leaders will consider

cutting costs or shedding anything deemed 'unnecessary' for the education of children. Now more than ever, school leaders will want to distinguish between 'nice to haves' and non-negotiable legal requirements – but you must ensure the latter are actually being fulfilled.

For instance, undertaking portable appliance testing isn't a legal requirement, however protecting people from an electric shock is, and PAT testing forms part of that general duty.

COVID-19 has had a massive knock-on effect on school budgets. From a health and safety perspective, this requires a careful balancing act between maintaining and enhancing compliance while at the same time ensuring finite funds are spent wisely.

'Casualty of COVID'

Another phrase often used to explain why the necessary documentation isn't in place.

Whilst it's understandable that some checks, and the recording of such checks, may have slipped during COVID (and I have experienced this first hand), it's now time for these to be revived. In my experience, a common area of weakness in schools' compliance is recordkeeping, and this can be a critical failing. Documentation needs to be filed in a place that's easily accessible, where more than one person knows the location, and where it can be readily produced when requested.

Another area of weakness, particularly during the recovery phase, is inviting contractors into your school to carry out the necessary maintenance/inspections/works. By the start of the new academic year, one would hope that schools will have completed all contractor revisits; however, it's also essential that you can prove, through paperwork, that the necessary checks have been carried out.

Where contractors haven't yet visited, provided school leaders can demonstrate that they have taken all 'reasonably practicable' efforts to arrange this, that should satisfy the HSE until a suitable contractor is available.

Staying compliant

We know that the HSE, insurers and the Independent Schools Inspectorate are likely to be visiting schools.

In reality, there's only so long schools can remain 'regulator ready'. While schools want to show their best side, this can be tiring, and over time standards begin to slip. School leaders must therefore ensure they have the necessary documentation in place all year round given that the HSE can turn up without notice.

What's more, governors and trustees should scrutinise and challenge what school leaders are doing; they must be eyes-on (strategic) and hands-off (leaving day-to-day operations to school staff) whilst ensuring that health and safety is a key area of focus.

Ultimately, school leaders just want to do the right thing; in my eyes, that's looking after students, staff and others by focusing time on health and safety.

So, what can school leaders do to address all of the above?

1. Audit to identify any gaps in your health and safety management system
2. Put plans in place to plug those gaps, and;
3. Involve others by communicating and don't carry all the baggage alone

Relaxation of standards

Although restrictions are easing, we must all remain vigilant. Towards the end of last term, the relaxation of standards started to become more evident; this can be seen in playgrounds, where face masks aren't worn as much as they once were. Similarly, those who are fully vaccinated may become less stringent in following COVID safety measures.

Whilst we're all eager for normality to return, it could be a little too early to abandon precautions just yet, especially with new variants circumnavigating the globe. School leaders must follow, and be in a position to demonstrate that they are following, the most relevant government guidance.

Personal hygiene

Two types of person are likely to emerge as restrictions lift: those who continue to lather themselves in sanitiser and disinfect every surface they touch, and those who abandon these elevated standards of

personal hygiene and return to the good old days.

COVID-19 has taught us that we can increase our level of personal hygiene if we believe the threat of mortality is real. However, we have also learnt that this can come at a cost; continuous cleaning can be a psychological trigger (causing obsessive thoughts and actions) and can also damage our skin, the body's largest organ.

School leaders must be mindful of striking the balance, taking into account individuals' psychological health.

Psychosocial hazards

Schools leaders are no doubt already aware of the toll that 2020/21 has taken on people's mental health and wellbeing. The HSE reports 77,000 cases of stress, depression or anxiety in 2020 alone, and our own research found that over two thirds of school leaders have seen an increase in mental health conditions in the past year.

The HSE suggests that these conditions are more prevalent in education, where demands are high, responsibilities are huge, and it's almost impossible to ever get the job done fully. This can trigger anxious thoughts and contribute to burnout; add in the ongoing impact of COVID on overall wellbeing, and this is a considerable challenge for schools to contend with.

Wellbeing is both an organisational and individual responsibility. I believe we have to teach people how to apply self-regulation, and we can do that through resilience training.

Jumping to COVID conclusions

Before COVID-19 existed, we were well versed with the common cold, flu and other ailments.

Going forward, it's important that we don't assume a COVID diagnosis every time a person doesn't feel themselves. Of course, if they are showing signs and symptoms, then they should get tested, but we should resist the urge to jump to conclusions. As we enter a new academic year and brace for the upcoming winter seasons, we must bear in mind that not all ailments are COVID-related.

Ultimately, while vigilance is important, COVID must now become one of many health and safety considerations for schools, rather than the full focus.

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