

Well led

## Me, me, me: **how putting yourself first is the ultimate selfless act**

Ben Levinson shares his heartfelt story about how important it is for us to look after our wellbeing first.

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I **love** being a headteacher. I love it **so** much. I did various jobs before I trained to be a teacher – and I enjoyed being a teacher – but I **love** being a head. The sense of purpose, autonomy, strategic thinking, children, community and the amazing people I get to work with are just the best. But it is also tough. We're talking full-on days and sleepless nights. Every minute of every day is tough. Responsibility for 650 children and 90 staff is tough. A whole community looking to you is tough. And that's when we're not in the midst of a global pandemic.

Of course, a lot of what is driving that is out of our control. Accountability measures, funding, changing demographics and societal expectations. It is vital that we continue working to improve the system, but we also have to accept that will take time. What is in our control is our own wellbeing and I'm here to tell you that it is time you put yourself first.

The Education Support 2020 Teacher Wellbeing Index highlighted some devastating figures.



**70%**  
were working 51  
hours+ per week.

**59%**  
considered leaving in  
the past two years.

When I started at Kensington, I did not prioritise my own health and wellbeing. At school I'd played lots of sport and been very active but that fell away at university and never really re-started. By the time I got to Kensington I was pushing the scales at over 17 stone. Having moved out of London, my daily commute was no longer walking and in my new role I was more desk-based than standing in front of a class. Ofsted came between me accepting the job and starting, and the school went from Good to Requires Improvement. On my seventh day we had our HMI monitoring visit. I quickly realised that to be successful, first and foremost I would need to work on me. Leadership also exposed my anxiety and self-doubt, something that had always been in the background but that I'd never addressed.

As unthinkable as this is, if you did that survey again today, I fear that the figures would be significantly worse. It is a crisis. In fact, I fear that once we come out of this pandemic, it could be even worse.

So began a long journey that continues to this day. My physical health has been crucial. I lost nearly 5 stone (some of which has gone back on over the past 12 months!) Firstly, I started cycling. At times I've run. Others I've lifted weights. I love to walk. In the nearly eight years since I started, I have been consistent in exercising – although the specific exercise hasn't been consistent. In 2021 I'm hoping to do my first ultra-marathon and I'm aiming to run and walk 2,000km across the year.

Of equal importance has been my mental and emotional journey. I've done a lot of self-discovery. Mainly through reading and lots of reflective conversations. I've realised a great deal about who I am: my introversion, my anxiety, my competitiveness, my sense of justice (and injustice). I've accepted a lot about myself and made peace with a lot.

Investing in myself in this way is what has made the difference for me as a leader. I still wake up at 2am with my mind whirring – that's a work in progress but I have become considerably more resilient. I am far more able to deal with the stresses and strains in a calm and considered way. If I get stressed, getting out and breaking a sweat will quickly get me back to a good place. Then I can get back up, go in, and resolve whatever problems are awaiting me.

One of the biggest barriers to achieving this was not the motivation – or the endless cakes and biscuits in the staff room – but the guilt. The guilt of putting myself first was almost too much to bear at times. Teaching can produce martyrs. I've been in staff rooms where how little sleep you got because you'd been up planning, marking etc to the early hours had become a very unhealthy competition. **As headteachers, there is the added guilt that you are responsible for your team and that you have to set an example. And you do! Setting an example is crucial. But the example you must set is that prioritising your own health and wellbeing is the least selfish thing you can do.**

There is always too much to do. The to do list never ends. There are always demands. Always someone who needs to speak to you. There is always another report to write or meeting to have. It is endless. At Kensington, we have spent a lot of time reflecting on Pareto's Theory. For those of you not familiar with it, Pareto (an Italian economist) stated that 80% of the outcomes come from 20% of the inputs. We have used this in many contexts but, for me, I realised that part of my 20% was how I turned up each day. Of course I need to understand budgets and safeguarding and learning, but more important was me. When I am at my

best, I'm amazing. I'm compassionate, sharp-witted, focused. I say the right thing and do the right thing at the right time. But so little of my time I was at my best. So I tried to understand why. I invested in my physical health and then my mental health. At the start I hid this. Leaving 'early' was because of a meeting. Taking 10 minutes to meditate was done in the toilet. But the more I invested in myself the more I saw how much of a difference it made to my leadership. And the more I realised that, the more I realised that I needed to share this.

Kensington is the 2020 Teaching Awards Primary School of the Year and the TES 2020 Wellbeing and Mental Health School of the Year. Ofsted came back two years after that monitoring visit and graded the school Outstanding. Part of the school's 20% is the investment we have made in ourselves as people and as leaders. We have given ourselves the permission to do what we need to in order to be our best selves more often. That is different for everyone.

For some it is leaving early to go to the gym. For others it's having time with family. For some it is about relationships with colleagues or the role we carve out for ourselves. What I know is that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't managed to deal with my guilt. Giving myself the permission and the agency to put **me** first and to invest in my own health and wellbeing was the best decision I ever made. By being selfish I have ultimately done more for my team, the children, and the community than I ever did working an extra hour or ticking another item off my to do list. And, perhaps more importantly, I still **love** being a headteacher.



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