

The Director of Finance & Operations role at Marple Hall School

The Director of Finance & Operations role at Marple Hall School is nothing but varied! Having had experience of being a Business Manager in two primary schools, I would say that the fundamental purpose of this role is similar – to provide the school and the people in it with everything they need to do a great job, every day.

My focus has always been to do the best for the cohort of students we currently have on roll and for those who will attend in the future. It's the foundation of how a school with heart works, to my mind the bottom line always comes later. The students are always my ultimate priority. They have to be.

I think that anyone who works in a school has to have a passion for helping young people, and that means getting out of the office at strategic times to meet students and staff. Only then can a school finance leader properly understand why the money is so important. Therefore, for me a typical day can start with duties on the main road outside school welcoming students and making sure that vehicle access to the site is kept to a minimum, a task that is repeated at the end of the day too. It seems that the older students get the more they lose the use of their legs.... most peculiar! The day then moves through finances, break duties, payroll, on-call, bill payments, lunch duties, financial planning; the role is varied and certainly never boring. It's fast paced and a mixture of planned and reactive needs. A flexible approach is essential.

I find having this face to face contact with them at the start of the day and also when I do my on-calls and duties helps them see that there are other members of staff who care for them not just the teachers, and that we also want to ensure their school life is a positive experience. In addition, it makes you more approachable when they need someone to trust, especially in a large school like MHS.

The second thing that stood out for me compared to working in a primary school was the change I personally had to make to my work practice. I had to learn to 'let go' of all the aspects of my role that only I had completed in my two previous primary schools. I was used to doing everything and having detailed knowledge of everything. Over time, I still have a full overview of everything that is happening but in a more strategic way and have an amazing team of over 100 support staff who are outstanding in the individual roles they have as well as collectively. Having this overview has enabled me to ensure I still have knowledge of the whole school, that segregation of duties is facilitated fully, all support staff are accountable for their own workload and improving working practices not only for their own benefit but also for the school. After all who is better at making improvements than the person in the job!

Of course, the main function of the role is to ensure that the school has a strong strategy for maximising the use of our resources each year. Schools are not awash with money, but in a forward-thinking school like ours there are always people willing to spend whatever

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money we do have in a flash for the good of the students. Therefore, strategic planning, priority management, income generation, negotiation of good deals, management of contracts and careful monitoring of spending are all essential aspects to this job and a fundamental part of helping our school to improve. The role also has a HR element as we manage our own recruitment and payroll at MHS, and of course attention to detail is paramount here.

One big difference I've noticed since moving to MHS from a primary school is that I'm a fully inclusive member of the Senior Leadership Team with a very valid role to play not only as the Director of Finance and Operations but also, and just as importantly, as the voice for the Support Staff. We've worked hard as a team to remove the 'them and us' barriers and the difference has been amazing and no more showcased than during the pandemic.

It's been all hands-on deck at various points such as with lateral flow testing of the whole cohort of students...five times now. The support staff were the first to volunteer and those who weren't able to stepped up to cover the colleagues who did. The teachers also offered their free time to cover for absent colleagues to reduce the need for bringing in non-MHS personnel and keep the consistency for the students.

While writing this I've been reflecting back on when I first started at MHS 9 years ago and how it went. First of all, I got lost.... a lot! We're a site of over 30 acres with 2 four storey buildings, a Drama block, Sports Hall, MFL block, Design Tech block and a Food Studies block. I also found learning the names and faces of almost 200 staff not too small a task and I'm not even going to start on knowing all 1500+ students.... thank goodness SIMS has pictures!!

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work in an environment that supports others, whether it is students or staff, to improve their life chances and that I may have made a small difference along their journey.

Helen Harris
Retiring Director of Finance and Operations
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