



Lessons in Austerity: A UNISON survey of school support staff

Introduction

The devastating cuts to support staff in schools are happening largely under the radar, with relatively little publicity. But the impact on those who remain – the support staff themselves, the teaching workforce and the pupils – is severe.

Earlier this year, UNISON spoke in depth to a number of school support staff ranging from administrators and teaching assistants to those working in facilities. Stories emerged of the huge pressures they faced, which should ring alarm bells for everyone involved in the welfare of both children and staff in education.

A subsequent survey of 12,120 school support staff across the UK in May this year revealed the extent of the problems as outlined. They are outlined in this report.

Findings

The largest group of respondents were teaching assistants, technicians/IT support workers and office/administrative staff. A significant number of responses (over 1,000 each) also came from people working as receptionists, cover supervisors, site/facilities staff and in catering teams.

Most of those who took part in the survey were long-standing members of staff, with 68% having worked in education for over five years, and 46% for more than ten years.

Funding issues

Despite government assertions about increased money going to schools, the vast majority of survey respondents said their education establishments were facing funding problems. Nearly nine in ten (87%) said that either there had been significant cuts to staff and resources in their workplace, or that managers had warned of more cuts to come. Others said that even though no 'official' announcements had been made, cutbacks in their schools were noticeable.

Restructures

UNISON believes that staffing restructures have almost become a way of life in many schools. Overall, 76% of staff said that their school had been subjected to restructuring, or that it was planned for the near future. Over a third (38%) of respondents said there had been more than one staffing restructure in the past five years, which suggests these exercises are not working terribly well.

Staffing restructures are a problem because:

- They consume a large amount of management time and money that could be better spent elsewhere.
- They have more of an impact on support staff than on teaching staff, and lead to confusion over responsibilities and duties.

- The breaks in continuity affect a school's ability to meet health and safety requirements and adequately support more vulnerable children.
- They can cause stress and anxiety amongst employees, affecting staff mental health and productivity.
- Staff remaining in post following a restructure are left usually with the same amount of work, but fewer colleagues to do it – so work overload is frequently the result.

Workload issues

In the UNISON survey, more than 70% of staff stated that they undertook tasks that used to be performed by a colleague on more pay, with 35% saying that they did so without sufficient training. Most said this was because they were having to take on work previously done by someone who had been made redundant.

School employees reported feeling overwhelmed and anxious by the increased demands, and constantly pulled in different directions. Two in five (42%) said they were regularly taken away from their core duties to cover 'emergencies', while three in five (59%) said they always felt rushed because of their heavy workload.

Staff also mentioned having to work through their breaks to supervise children and perform first aid, often without adequate training. Teaching assistants raised issues around being expected to teach, provide cover and perform jobs that higher level teaching assistants should do – without being paid for this. Nearly half the staff (46%) said they did unpaid overtime on a regular basis.

Funding was mentioned many times as a reason behind the workload issues. Hundreds of comments received as part of the survey blamed poor management planning. A large number of respondents said children with special educational needs and disabilities were not getting adequate support.

The survey reveals that the majority of staff are under great stress, which is affecting their work and their health. Over four-fifths (83%) of respondents said they had experienced stress as a result of their workload in the past five years, with one in five (20%) needing to take time off work.

Conclusion

Funding cuts, increased workloads and low morale are becoming the norm for school employees up and down the country. Support staff have borne the brunt of the cuts to educational budgets, with a high number of job losses. The employees that remain in post are often expected to take on the work of those that have left. Reducing support staff is also having a significant knock-on effect on teachers and pupils. The workload for teachers is increasing, as they lose the staff that support them; and children with

special educational needs and disabilities, who rely heavily on support staff, are losing out on vital help.

Excerpts from interviews with school support staff* in early 2018

- Emma was an administrative assistant in a primary school who was constantly expected to do the work of a more senior colleague who had been made redundant. Her manager said that it was in her job description, despite this not being the case, and the extra work was still expected of her. She has now left education.
- Steve says: “My job description bears no comparison to what I do now. I’ve gone from a handyman to taking on many of the roles previously the job of the bursar, including managing 11 facilities staff. I am paid the same wage (less than £20,000) as before and it’s a case of ‘do everything or you’re sacked – it’s for the benefit of the school.’”
- Caroline, a higher level teaching assistant, told UNISON she was constantly moved from ‘pillar to post’, and unable to work to the best of her ability.
- Kate, a teaching assistant in a special school, said: “If a teacher is absent then a teaching assistant is asked to cover. If a lunchtime supervisor is absent then a teaching assistant is asked to cover. Teaching assistants are asked to put breakfast tables out because the head does not want to pay cleaning staff to do it. Morale is falling and senior managers are not supportive.”
- Claire is a higher level teaching assistant who used to spend most of her time working with small groups of children who needed extra help. Now, she is spending the majority of her time helping prepare for classes, although formerly “this would have been done by a teacher who left and was not replaced”.
- Sarah, a learning mentor at a secondary school, has seen the pastoral team halved. This means the school is unable “to follow its own behaviour policy, late detentions are not staffed so many pupils don’t turn up to them.” She says a new staff member appointed for safeguarding work has not received relevant training. The designated teacher for looked-after children does not have time to train staff about these issues so “it’s the most vulnerable children feeling the impact of cuts.” A learning support administrative assistant who has recently been appointed is becoming the main point of contact for special needs students. Because of this, the woman has been sent on an advanced safeguarding course, which Sarah says is “far beyond her remit.”
- Jake, a teaching assistant, said: “Teaching assistants are increasingly being asked to get involved with recording data for the progression of the children in their groups, whereas before we we’d feed this back to the teacher. This makes you feel extremely responsible for that child’s education, rather than supporting the pupil with guidance from the teacher, as happened in the past. If a teaching assistant wishes to progress to be a higher level or take a teaching degree, then the extra responsibilities might be acceptable. But overall a person becomes a teaching assistant to support in the school environment, not be a teacher on the cheap.”

**Names have been changed*

