

Workload and Stress in Schools - UNISON Survey 2016

UNISON is the largest union in schools, representing over 250,000 members in support staff roles across the UK and 150,000 of these are teaching assistants.

Our members work in a variety of roles, including teaching and classroom assistants, school business managers, catering and cleaning staff, IT, HR and finance staff, administrators, librarians, technicians, caretakers, facilities and maintenance staff. UNISON represents staff across all types of schools and special units, including academies in England.

UNISON carried out a survey in March and April 2016 of school support staff, receiving responses from more than 14,000 (14,514) schools staff across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. In terms of responses, teaching assistants were the majority (8,211) and responses were also received from nursery nurses, school business managers, technicians, librarians, administrators, secretaries, finance workers, caretakers, catering staff and cleaners. The largest group were full-time (5,155), then part-time (4,404) or term-time only (4,216) and the majority were aged between 46 to 55.

The survey results show the devastating impact that funding cuts, and the related increase in workload, are having on the health and morale of the school support staff workforce. UNISON believes that a health and wellbeing crisis is now engulfing our schools which will result in a mass exodus of hardworking, dedicated staff unless urgent action is taken by the government.

Workload and stress – a crisis in our schools

High workplace stress levels are known to lead to reduced productivity, higher sickness absence rates, lower engagement and a drop in morale. If high stress levels are not addressed then this can lead to mental illness, including anxiety and depression.

At a time when schools are facing real-term funding cuts and are under increasing pressure and scrutiny to deliver higher grades and better OFSTED reports, it is vital that the school support staff are well motivated and well trained to help deliver the best possible educational experience.

If stress is not addressed schools will face increasing sick-pay bills to cover staff absence and staffing continuity will be disrupted, impacting negatively on children's education

Workload is a major concern. More than half of staff (54.9% or 6,442) say they're either struggling each week (41.5% or 4,869) to do all their work or are finding it impossible to manage everything that's asked of them (13.4% or 1,573).

Worryingly, over half of school support staff (52% or 6,172) report experiencing stress, anxiety or depression due to their workload and it seems that school employers are failing to act. Two in five (40% or 4,604) feel unable to report

workload concerns to their managers. Of those who have reported their worries (43% or 4,970), more than half (56% or 2,971) say managers have not addressed their concerns.

UNISON's schools support staff survey found that 47% (5,356) of school support staff across the UK are considering leaving their job. Of these, the main reasons for this are low pay (cited by 51.5% of respondents); stress at work (cited by 49% of respondents) and workload (cited by 37% of respondents).

A recent survey (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/mar/22/teachers-plan-leave-five-years-survey-workload-england>) found 43% of England's teachers plan to leave in the next five years.

Whilst 41 councils have now signed up to the Time To Change pledge to take action on mental health, the reality is that the pressure schools are under has a direct effect on staff well-being and mental health. Many schools are outside local authority control, but it appears even those schools under the auspices of local government are failing to take action to reduce the stress experienced by school support staff.

A separate UNISON survey of 435 teaching assistants has shown that, on average, TAs are working 3.7 hours of unpaid overtime per week and clerical/administrative staff are working an average of 2.5 hours of unpaid overtime.

School support staff explain: support staff survey responses

"Staff cuts are at a dangerous level. People are off sick due to stress because there aren't enough staff. Teaching assistants are taking on teaching roles on a regular basis."

"Classrooms are strained; every single TA is doing far more than they are paid for. They are covering classes constantly with no support - it is making people depressed."

"Teaching assistants have greatly increased workload involving more work outside paid hours. More teaching/planning is being taken on by TAs, covering more staff absence due to teachers' increased workload. All staff are covering for cleaning staff when they are absent as the cost of supply cleaners is too high."

"My workload is highly pressurised, with more and more tasks to complete. The job isn't a pleasure or a vocation anymore - it's a means to an end. I don't feel the children benefit from my expertise as it is full-on, I am constantly rushing my teaching as the schedule is so tight, so much to fit in."

"The part-time technician retired and has not been replaced. The two remaining technicians therefore have an increased workload. Science teaching posts have not been filled, resulting in a succession of cover teachers which has added to our workload."

“Pressure has increased a lot this year. Staff morale is low; workload has increased for a lot of staff and TAs; too much content in new curriculum; harder to keep track of children's progress. Workload jobs are being pushed from teachers to TAs who don't get extra time to complete jobs and work piles up. We are finding it harder to complete tasks we should be doing. There is no time to turn around. I stayed on later to help to catch up and to clear paperwork, ie marking. Job satisfaction is zero.”

UNISON is calling for:

- The government to establish a national workload initiative with the support of staff unions and employers to urgently produce recommendations for schools on reducing workload pressures on support staff. The DfE established a national initiative for teachers, “the workload challenge”, but did not include support staff in the full scope of this initiative
- OFSTED to make staff health and well-being a mandatory part of its reporting process on schools – ie the introduction of a new category within the **OFSTED** common inspection framework
- The DfE to require all schools to conduct stress risk assessments and produce an action plan for dealing with workplace stress
- The government to commission an independent impact assessment on the impact of its school-funding changes on pupil attainment and the health and well-being of staff