



Chief Executive's Foreword

Education Support began this programme of research in 2017 to understand more about the mental health and wellbeing experiences of staff working in education. This report is the most important one yet. It gives us an insight into the working lives of educators under the ongoing shadow of Covid-19. It also contextualises that experience within five years of primary data.

There is good news to note. The sense of purpose that motivates teachers is alive and well. Schools and colleges have made notable improvements in implementing visible wellbeing policies and in supporting staff who experience poor mental health. While workload and the lack of a work-life balance drive stress in the sector, the data show some improvements over five years.

Overall however, this report is a wake-up call for anyone who cares about the future of education in the UK. Three quarters of the workforce experience behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms of poor wellbeing due to work. Our education workforce has relatively high levels of anxiety and depression compared to the general population, and levels of exhaustion and acute stress are rising.

There are plenty more data points of concern in this report: the need for greater support for trainee and early career teachers, the extent of presenteeism, the pernicious spectre of long hours, the lack of trust in line management relationships, and many more.

There is no simple answer to the issues raised by this research. There are complex drivers at play, affecting individuals, particular organisations and differing regional and national contexts. But there are meaningful actions that can be taken immediately by governments, schools, colleges and individuals to drive positive change.

These findings represent the experience of school and college support staff, teachers, lecturers and leaders. This is their story. If we fail to act on these findings we are complicit in the damage to the lives and opportunities of those responsible for teaching, guiding and inspiring our nation's next generation.

Please share this report. We stand ready to work with anyone who wants to improve this picture.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sinéad Mc Brearty', with a long, sweeping tail.

Sinéad Mc Brearty
Chief Executive Officer

#TWIX2021

Our conclusions

1. Long-term mental health trends require further improvement

Our five year data shows that although good work is taking place many long-term trends in teacher and education staff mental health are not meaningfully improving. Stress levels have remained high for the last five years. Workload remained a concern and is consistently one of the most cited reasons for symptoms of poor mental health. Add to this the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and our data shows that the education sector is exhausted, over-worked and unsustainably stressed.

2. Senior leader experiences

Senior leaders work increasingly long hours as their roles have expanded during the pandemic. They reported the highest levels of stress, insomnia and burnout. They cited their work-life balance to be a major cause of their symptoms of poor mental health. Their levels of exhaustion were up eleven percent compared to last year, which was during the height of the pandemic. They were more likely to use specific coping strategies and prefer to seek support from outside of work.

The overall wellbeing score (WEMWBS) of teachers and education staff has been lower than the general population for three years

3. School teacher experiences

School teachers experience similar challenges regarding workload, work-life balance and stress, having also seen an expansion in their role during the pandemic. They are most likely to report symptoms which are signs of depression when compared with senior leaders. Over four in ten reported symptoms as signs of anxiety. They are also most likely to seek support from colleagues for problems at work. Early career teachers struggle with panic attacks, tearfulness and mood swings and more training is required to help them manage their own as well as their pupils' mental health. Although earlier career teachers are more likely to report feeling prepared (to manage their mental health) by their ITT training than later career teachers.

Improving the mental health and wellbeing of teachers will support the government's aims to recruit and retain more talented teachers and leaders at the time we need them most

4. Support staff experiences

Support staff are most likely to feel trusted by their line managers. When compared to school teachers, they are less likely to feel that the culture of the organisation negatively affects their wellbeing and are also more comfortable disclosing mental health challenges to their employer. When compared to senior leaders, they are more likely to report experiencing no symptoms of poor mental health. Compared to both groups, they are least likely to report psychological symptoms and least likely to report working more than 41 hours a week. The issues affecting mental health most reported by support staff are low pay, reducing unnecessary paper work or data gathering and work-life balance.

5. Organisational culture

Organisational culture has a significant impact on staff wellbeing. Trust, relationships and a sense of being supported (or not) all had an effect on presenteeism and overall wellbeing. Good relationships between teachers and their leadership, and feeling trusted by line managers are important drivers for improved workplace wellbeing. Improving the organisational culture is more important than ever as school teams rally to deliver on ambitious education recovery plans.

We applaud the work being done by schools, colleges and training providers. We are heartened to see the improvements relating to mental health policies and their growing awareness among education staff. We can also see that the institutional leaders responsible for driving cultural change are themselves under immense pressure. The interrelationship between personal and institutional wellbeing is complex and leaders must be provided with the support required to deliver wellbeing improvements for their staff.

6. Focusing on pupils

The mental health impact of the pandemic on children and young people is still being understood, but can affect their readiness to learn. The mental health of their teachers cannot be viewed as a separate issue, or a luxury. The teachers and education staff responsible for guiding and inspiring children and young people need to be mentally well themselves to get the best out of their learners who are struggling.

No one can do their best work when they are emotionally depleted and the cost of teachers and education staff being unwell is simply too high

Our recommendations

For government and policymakers:

Educator mental health must be at the heart of education recovery plans and all education policy

Teacher and education staff mental health must be central to education recovery plans. It cannot be seen as separate from the mental health and wellbeing of our young people. Teachers and education staff need to be well enough themselves to guide their students through an intensive phase of catch up and recovery. We welcome the publication of the Department for Education's Wellbeing Charter and call on the Department to ensure its principles are consistently implemented throughout all new policies. In particular, when announcing new policies, all departments should consider the impact of implementation timeframes on teacher workload and wellbeing.

Inspection bodies must adapt to the current challenging context

In previous editions of the Teacher Wellbeing Index we have called for the accountability system to be reviewed to reduce undue pressure on school staff, and keep them focused on teaching and learning. Given the current circumstance, we call on inspection bodies to examine the level of empathy they show during inspections. They must also take into consideration the realities of running a school during the Covid-19 pandemic. For many school and college leaders, the effects of the pandemic continue to take their toll on the day to day running of their organisations, despite significant effort and already working beyond full capacity.

Existing frameworks present opportunities for improvements

Newly qualified teachers are at risk of experiencing a range of symptoms of poor mental health. A consistent approach to quality training that prioritises mental health and wellbeing must be adopted. In England, existing training frameworks including the Initial Teacher Training Core Content framework, Early Career Framework and National Professional Qualifications provide a real opportunity for improvement. We invite all Education Departments and training providers to work with us to ensure that mental health and wellbeing is consistently prioritised within all frameworks and teachers feel prepared to face the challenges of the profession.

Recruitment and retention of senior leaders must be prioritised

Education Departments must have a dedicated recruitment and retention plan for senior leaders. Our Teacher Wellbeing Index consistently shows that senior leaders are the most stressed and work the longest hours. A clear plan must be established to retain the talent needed to marshal us through the education recovery, and to signal to today's teachers that leadership is an appealing path to take.

For schools and colleges:

Prioritise a culture of wellbeing and reduce stigma

There is a persistent culture of stigma that hasn't gone away over the last five years. In every Teacher Wellbeing Index many education staff report avoiding talking to colleagues about their mental health challenges due to how they will be perceived at work. Creating a culture where it is safe and beneficial to discuss the emotional effects of work is a crucial first step towards improving your staff's mental health. Visit our website for more information on how to get started: educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/

Look after your leadership

There can be no doubt that the leadership community is exhausted and many are on the brink of burnout or resignation. We recommend that governors, academy boards, parent councils and local authorities put plans in place to protect this cohort and regularly ask questions to understand their level of wellbeing. Regularly reviewing workloads and proactively supporting good relationships between senior leadership are also vital areas of focus. Senior leaders need opportunities to work with peers in other organisations, so they can receive support away from concerns about affecting team morale or exposing their own vulnerability. You can read more about our support services for senior leaders (funded by Welsh Government and DfE) here: educationsupport.org.uk/leaders

Support your staff

Although stigma persists, staff outside of leadership roles are more likely to seek support from colleagues. This means key staff, and especially line managers, must be able to safely and confidently respond if a colleague discloses a mental health challenge. We recommend regularly addressing wellbeing issues in line manager and departmental meetings. Awareness of resources and appropriate sources of support outside of your organisation is also important for staff in line management and head of department roles. You can read more about our resources for individuals here: educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-individuals/

These recommendations for schools and colleges depend on the availability of sufficient resources. Insufficient funding is one of the drivers of excessive workload, which in turn is a key wellbeing driver. The Government's extra £4.7bn core funding and £1.8bn for education recovery is welcome. However, many schools and colleges still lack sufficient resources to meet the needs of their communities. This is particularly true for smaller schools, and those in areas of increased need. The funding model must evolve again to provide schools and colleges with the capacity to recover, deliver and improve.