

Voices from the School Office



UNISON Survey of Admin and Management Staff 2014

The school team is a mix of professional, technical, managerial and site staff, linked by their vital roles in the educational achievement and well-being of children and young people. UNISON¹ carries out periodic surveys of different staff groups and this survey focused on administrative, finance and business management staff. They shoulder the daily demands of financial and management systems as well as staff, pupils, parents and outside organisations. Schools are complex organisations that don't run themselves, but sometimes not enough attention is paid to those who keep the school wheels turning.

The survey - summary

UNISON carried out a survey of school office staff². It aimed to monitor workplace issues and improve UNISON's understanding of life working in schools today. With **2350** responses, the findings provide the most comprehensive data on this staff group to date:

- 62% were in community schools; over 19% in academies; others were from voluntary-aided, voluntary-controlled and trust schools.
- 55% of respondents worked in primary schools, 39% in secondaries; 6% in special schools and others in pupil referral units and hospital schools.
- Nearly 50% were administrators, over 20% business managers and the rest a mix of finance, data, exam, PA and secretarial staff.

Staff frequently say that they enjoy working in the school environment, but are struggling to cope with excessive pressures. The following comments illustrate the point:

"I enjoy the variety the school brings to the job, but over the last 4 years when the workload has increased so much, it has become unsustainable. At present I am on long term sick leave with work-related stress." (Administrator, Primary School)

"I love my job - but the workload is increasing and affecting my health, i.e. my blood pressure, on a daily basis." (Admin officer, primary school)

"Just handed in my resignation yesterday, after nearly 11 years of loyal service due to issues related to increasing work load, lack of support from supervisor and line manager, feelings of isolation, vague and ambiguous job description, changing goal posts. These issues were beginning to take their toll on my home life; the increased work load was leaving me utterly exhausted and making me feel ill. I decided to quit even though I do not have a job to go to." (Administrator, secondary school)

¹ UNISON represents 350,000 staff working in education – more than one quarter of its total membership

² There are 85,000 admin staff in English schools alone (DfE data) – more than 30,000 in UNISON membership

Top concerns expressed by respondents:

- increasing workload (93%)
- low pay (90%)
- work-related stress (84%)
- job security (74%)
- lack of training and CPD opportunities (61%)
- managing challenging behaviour (59%)
- dealing with pupils' health needs (57%)
- bullying from colleagues (41%)

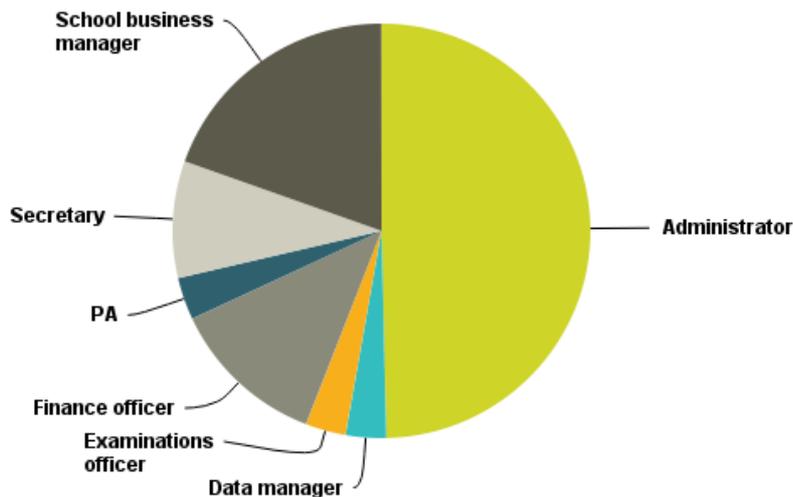
These are shocking headlines and are followed by detailed comment from respondents.

The findings

Admin and finance roles are incredibly diverse and vary hugely between schools. 50% of respondents to UNISON's survey described themselves as administrators, 20% as school business managers, 12% as finance officers and 9% as secretaries, with smaller groups of examinations officers and data managers. 23 respondents commented that they were "all of the above", predominantly respondents working in primary and special schools.

Q4 Which category best describes your role at school?

Answered: 2,077 Skipped: 274



A third of respondents said they performed more than one role at school, with a whole range of different combinations declared, for example:

Admin and technician in the translating department

Bursar, clerk to governors

Secretary and Xerox engineer!

Duke of Edinburgh coordinator, exams admin

Secretary, first aider, finance person

Examinations officer and cover manager

Secretary, breakfast club supervisor, finance administrator

Teaching assistant, coordinator, mentor, admin assistant

First aid, general factotum! All things to all people!

Secretary, finance officer, data manager, business manager

Secretary, team leader, pupil supervisor, canteen supervision, no janitor so cover this during school hours

Dining hall supervisor, secretarial

Clerk to governors, purchaser of breakfast club food

Clerk to governors, educational visits co-ordinator, school business manager

Administrator, extended schools club co-ordinator and play-worker

Admin, first aid, premises management, health and safety (including risk assessments)

School trips & manage annual school fund voluntary contributions

Secretary, attendance officer, medical needs

Cover supervisor, finance administration, maths admin

Press, exam assistant, SIMS administration

Exam invigilator, medical key worker

Supervisor, administrator, librarian

Administration assistant, home-link worker, nurture group & therapeutic story-writing group leader

Work patterns

***60% of respondents to the survey worked full-time, and 40% part-time**

***75% of staff worked term-time only, with a quarter working throughout the year**

***Two-thirds of respondents worked additional unpaid hours, with a quarter working four or more additional unpaid hours each week**

Many commented that work pattern depends on the time of year, for example, with extra hours over exam periods being particularly likely. The comments also revealed a mixed picture in terms of expectations around working additional hours. Working additional hours was their choice, some said, while others said it was expected by management. A common theme was regularly working through lunch breaks, with several commenting that this was due to it being the busiest time in the school. A few respondents commented that they were able to take time off in lieu for additional hours worked.

40% of respondents said they sometimes work for the school outside of the school day or out of term-time. Again responses were very varied, with some being paid an additional sum to clerk at governors' meetings twice a term or preparing accounts for one week during the summer holidays, while others 'volunteered' for various tasks, such as helping out at school events, and even gardening during the holidays! Many respondents spoke of checking emails from home throughout the year. Attitudes towards working out of term-time and the school day very much varied, influenced by whether this was paid, but also whether the additional tasks were taken on by choice or a necessity of workload.

The high level of goodwill voluntary help can mask pressured or forced unpaid overtime. For example:

"We take children to Activity & IT holiday from Monday to Friday every second year. I do enjoy it and is voluntary."

"As I am a hobby photographer I am often asked to take photographs at school events, which I am happy to. I process the photos in my own time. I have helped run the school photo club and provide photos for the newspapers on results days."

"Often bring work home and go into school in the holidays unpaid to keep on top of the work."

"3 evenings per year as unpaid clerk to the governors, total 12-15 hrs. During holidays, adhoc visits into school to deal with issues (minimal). Checking e-mails & responding periodically during 6 week summer holidays."

"I normally come in at least 1 day a week in all the school holidays = 13 unpaid days work a year, not taking into account extra hours worked during term time."

Increased workload

***93% expressed concerned about an increasing workload**

93% expressed concern about an increased workload, with nearly half being 'very concerned' about this issue. Many commented that the increased workload did not fit into their contracted hours and thus this work was being done unpaid and leading to increased stress levels.

"The biggest concern is the increase in workload but no increase in office hours, despite three serious conversations with my manager. The assumption is that I will manage anything and everything." (School Business Manager, Primary School)

"Converting to an academy has increased the finance workload both on a team and individual basis. No-one has looked at the amount of extra work that is involved, including monthly deadlines that resemble the old system 'Year end'." (Senior Finance Assistant, Secondary School)

"I work extra unpaid hours to get my job done but am docked pay if I need to take time off." (Examinations Officer/Office Administrator, Special School)

"The staffing level is too low for the workload, depending on a culture of good will and working beyond paid hours." (Receptionist/Admin Assistant, Primary School)

"Having to work extra hours, often at home in the evening, to keep on top of all the work." (School Administrator, Primary School)

Pay

***90% expressed concern about low pay**

"As admin assistant my role has grown and evolved which has been a positive challenge, but the pay is very poor and I have never had a pay rise"

According to the 2013 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, the average annual wage for a school secretary is £15,003. However, with no national pay scales for support staff, pay can vary widely. 77% of respondents to UNISON's survey were on term-time contracts, meaning most are earning significantly less than the equivalent full-time salary.

Unsurprisingly, pay was a vexed issue with 90% expressing concern about low pay. 35% stated they were 'very concerned' about this issue, with many comments referring to the impact of the pay freeze, downgrading and the introduction of zero hour contracts. Frustration was expressed that they were expected to work at a level higher than their pay-grade, for no extra reward.

Work-related stress

***84% expressed concern about work-related stress**

“Expectations from the school's leadership team, staff, the Authority's staff and outside agencies put significant pressure and subsequent stress onto me and other workers in the office. While having an impact on the teaching staff, the school being in 'Special Measures' has really impacted on the office staff.” (School business manager)

“I have restless nights and sometimes feel very stressed. I have even cried in the work place due to stress.” (Learning support co-ordinator)

The survey highlighted the huge amount of pressure and stress experienced by school office staff, with 84% expressing concern about work-related stress. 30% said they were ‘very concerned’ about this issue. Comments referred to stress resulting in mental health issues and time off work, as well as the stress of managing to live and provide for families on low pay. A frequent comment was that the level of responsibility and stress involved was not reflected in their pay grade.

Staffing levels

***78% expressed concern about staffing levels**

“The staffing level is too low for the workload, depending on a culture of good will and working beyond paid hours.” (Admin assistant)

“The school is making a large number of support staff redundant. I have been offered voluntary redundancy but am very concerned about future staffing levels because we are already very stretched now.” (Finance officer)

78% of respondents expressed concern about staffing levels, with 1 in 4 being ‘very concerned’. Two themes that emerged in the comments were staff not being replaced when they left, and the impact of staff shortages on stress levels for the whole staff team.

Job security

***74% expressed concern about job security**

“Most clericals are of the opinion that the Council wish to dispose of school clericals or at least, cut our pay grades by taking away many of our tasks.”

74% of respondents expressed concern about job security, with over a third being ‘very concerned’. Press stories in June 2013 reporting that the Treasury and Department for Education had been discussing phasing out the teaching assistant role had led to concern for many others about job security. Other comments suggested that concerns around job security were the result of various issues in schools including recent job cuts, rolling contracts with no guarantee of continued employment from term-to-term, and in some cases, not feeling valued by management. The implications of becoming academies were also worrying some respondents in terms of job security.

Training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities

***61% expressed concern over lack of training and CPD opportunities**

“As the only person with this type of role in the school it can feel quite isolated. I often don't feature at all on school plans for training and meetings or often find that content is entirely irrelevant to me.” (Admin assistant and principal's PA, primary academy)

“If I hadn't been self motivated and developed my learning in my own time then I would be struggling.” (School office manager, secondary school)

“Provision of training is excellent for all members of the support staff team in school” (School business manager, primary school)

“There is not enough progression for us particularly at primary level. CPD is not what it could be and there seems to be too much fear that if we excel too much we will leave.” (Admin assistant, primary school)

61% of respondents expressed concern over lack of training and CPD opportunities, with an even split between those who were 'very concerned', 'concerned' or 'slightly concerned'. A common theme in the comments was a feeling of being undervalued, with the school focusing on training for teachers.

Managing challenging behaviour, violence from pupils and allegations

***59% expressed concerned about managing challenging behaviour**

“Violence / abuse from parents is worse than from the children!” (Finance officer, primary academy)

59% of respondents expressed concerned about managing challenging behaviour, but of these, the majority were less concerned with this compared to other issues.

Violence from pupils was not an issue of concern for over half of respondents (56%). However, a fifth of respondents stated they were 'very concerned or concerned', and a quarter were 'slightly concerned'. The comments revealed that dealing with parents was more of a pressing concern, with respondents referring to threats, physical and verbal abuse, lack of respect and aggression. This tended to be coupled with a sense of frustration that management are reluctant to confront parents:

“Parents can make complaints against admin staff but when parents are rude and abusive against admin staff, there is no action taken by the school we cannot complain about their behaviour.” (School business manager, primary community school)

Allegations from children, parents or carers were also a concern for just under two thirds of respondents, with 26% being 'very concerned' or 'concerned' about this issue. Comments demonstrated that some felt they would be unsupported if an allegation was made.

Dealing with pupils' health needs

***57% expressed concern about dealing with pupils' health needs**

"I'm very concerned regarding pupils' health needs and the time taken away from other duties to attend to children with health issues. Also concerned regarding liability". (Support staff team leader, primary school)

"Administration of medicines on a day to day basis in a busy environment is a lot to expect for the pay. It's only a matter of time before an error happens in what are very busy offices." (Finance officer, primary school)

"We have a lot of pupils on medication which is administered from the office daily which is time consuming. I am in the office every afternoon alone and feel vulnerable and under pressure." (Senior clerical assistant, free school)

57% of respondents expressed a level of concern about dealing with pupils' health needs, with nearly a third being 'concerned' or 'very concerned'. Many commented on feeling pressured into providing medication when it was not part of their employment contract. The issue of asthma inhalers being held in the school office was also raised, in some cases due to concerns about lack of supervision, and in others, due to concerns about the unsuitability of the often frantic environment.

Bullying from colleagues

***41% expressed concern about bullying from colleagues**

"I am very concerned that support staff are badly treated and bullied. Issues regarding bullying are swept under the carpet, despite being widespread." (Curriculum assistant, secondary school)

"Work place bullying is a big problem that is ignored even though there are several reports." (Administrator, primary school)

41% expressed concern about bullying from colleagues, with 20% being 'very concerned' or 'concerned'. 59%, however, said that bullying from colleagues was not a concern, making it the least pressing issue overall in this survey. Where bullying was an issue, comments revealed that that bullying from management was the most common source. Issues varied from being bullied into working out-of-hours, to staff being afraid of being ill and having "reasonable requests" turned down. Other respondents reflected on past bullying issues that had been successfully resolved, or the lack of bullying amongst staff and the supportive culture of the school. Several respondents commented on the different experiences they had had at different schools depending on the support of the management team, e.g.

"I previously worked in a secondary school until early 2013, and I was a lot more concerned there, particularly with regards to treatment by senior management" (Admin assistant, primary academy)

Perception of place in the school team

55% of respondents agreed that they felt valued as a member of the school team. 21% disagreed, and 24% neither agreed nor disagreed. This suggests there is a lot of work to do in raising the profile of this vital workforce within schools, the wider community and government. This is crucial in boosting the morale of the workforce and enabling schools to reach their potential.

Final comment

Staff who are based in the school office are often eclipsed by those who work in the classroom, even though their whole-school responsibilities are demanding and numerous. The 2,350 responses to UNISON's survey provide a unique view of their working lives. Office staff issues are not dissimilar to others in the wider workforce and reflect that their recognition has not grown with their role. The survey demonstrates the magnitude of concerns felt by staff; more than 80% were concerned with increased workload, low pay and work-related stress. Other issues, such as job security, a lack of training opportunities, dealing with challenging behaviour and pupils' health needs were issues in about 60% of replies and almost half were affected by bullying from colleagues. The statistics from the survey are enhanced by the words of admin and management staff, which illuminate their personal experience. This survey should be of interest to all school staff, policy-makers and others who are concerned with the school workforce and education.

Issues raised in the survey will inform UNISON's ongoing campaigning work to speak up for support staff

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