

# A\* Class Act

UNISON speaking up for TAs

## Teaching assistants' survey 2013 – summary of results

### INTRODUCTION

UNISON is the largest union in education in the UK, representing 350,000 education support staff. UNISON members are critically important to the smooth running of all sections of the education system, and have an important contribution to make to deliver improved education outcomes for children and young people. There are 359,000 teaching assistants employed in England alone and UNISON represents over 111,000 of them. In parts of the UK teaching assistants are known as classroom assistants.

UNISON carried out a survey of teaching and classroom assistants (TAs) in autumn 2013. It aimed to monitor TA workplace issues and improve UNISON's understanding of life as a TA in schools today. There were just under 8,000 responses from TAs, with 70% working in community schools and over 17% working in academies. Others worked in voluntary-aided, voluntary-controlled and trust schools. 66% of respondents worked in primary schools, 24% in secondary schools and 10% in special schools.

While the survey showed that job satisfaction amongst TAs is high, it also showed that TAs are faced with hugely challenging issues, the most pressing being low levels of pay, working unpaid hours and job security.

*"TAs are taken advantage of, often paid hourly and term-time only, yet expected to work through unpaid breaks, or after hours as the norm. The list of duties is endless, on a wage little over £8 per hour. Good job we love our work!"*

### KEY FINDINGS

#### JOB SATISFACTION

**\*95% believe their job makes a difference in the lives of others**

*"I love my job and the satisfaction I get from helping a child to learn something new."*

The survey revealed high levels of job satisfaction amongst teaching assistants, with 95% believing their job makes a difference in the lives of others, and 83% saying that work gives them a feeling of accomplishment. Yet despite the high levels of job satisfaction, only half said they felt valued as a member of the school team.

#### POSITIVE IMPACT ON ATTAINMENT

**\*See examples at the end of this report**

The survey asked for examples of where teaching assistants had made a difference to pupil attainment. There were 749 responses to this question, a small selection of which are included at the end of this report.

## **PAY**

### **\*95% expressed concern about low pay**

*“I love my job but because of low pay I am looking for a new one. Pay is the big, big problem.”*

Where teaching assistants are employed by local authorities and paid according to the local government pay spine, the minimum starting salary for a teaching assistant is £12,145 and the maximum starting salary £17,802, (Income Data Services 2012). However, nearly 87% 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 95% expressing concern about low pay. 44% 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.

## **WORKING UNPAID HOURS AND INCREASED WORKLOAD**

### **\*83% expressed concerned about working unpaid hours**

*“TAs are being expected to do more and more teaching and duties that are not part of their job descriptions. No time is allocated to do marking and planning, which leads to more hours being worked unpaid.”*

83% expressed concern about working unpaid hours, with nearly a third being ‘very concerned’ about this issue. Over 56% of respondents said they regularly worked unpaid hours, with more than a third of these working four or more hours extra per week unpaid. 12% of respondents worked more than six hours of unpaid overtime every week. Many commented on working through lunch unpaid, assisting with school trips without being paid for the extra time given, and having to undertake training in their own time.

83% of respondents also stated that their workload had increased in the last year. 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. Many TAs also commented on the amount of pressure teachers were under as a result of increasing workload in meeting pupil progress targets, keeping OFSTED happy, and implementing new curricula.

## **WORK-RELATED STRESS**

### **\*72% reported being stressed at work at least half of the time**

*“Stress levels are unbelievable and people are going to work even when seriously ill because they are worried about losing jobs.”*

*“Stress levels are through the roof. I am 62 years old. If I could afford to retire I would go next week. I don't enjoy my job anymore. I feel anxious and depressed at the thought of work every Sunday night. I can't see things getting any better either.”*

The survey highlighted the huge amount of pressure and stress experienced by TAs, with 72% being stressed at work at least half of the time. 8% said they ‘always’ felt stressed at work; 28% ‘most of the time’; 36% ‘half of the time’ and 29% ‘once in a while’. Less than 1% stated they never feel stressed at work. 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.

## **JOB SECURITY**

### **\*89% expressed concern about job security**

*“My biggest concern is pay and job security. I am on a rolling contract so I am unsure as to whether I will have employment each September and even if I do have employment, whether I will be allocated enough hours to cover my bills.”*

89% 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 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 schools becoming academies were also worrying some respondents in terms of job security.

## **STAFFING LEVELS**

### **\*80% expressed concern about staffing levels**

*“Two staff members have already left this term. TAs will not be replaced.”*

80% 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.

## **DEALING WITH PUPILS’ HEALTH NEEDS**

### **\*73% expressed concern about dealing with pupils’ health needs**

*“My main concern is dealing with children who have complex and very specific medical needs with little training and no remuneration.”*

73% of respondents expressed a level of concern about dealing with pupils’ health needs, with nearly half being ‘concerned’ or ‘very concerned’. Many commented on feeling pressured into providing medication or medical procedures when not properly trained or comfortable to do so, and where it was not part of their employment contract. The issue of dealing with health needs without receiving remuneration for doing so was raised by a significant number.

## **MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR, VIOLENCE FROM PUPILS AND ALLEGATIONS**

### **\*82% expressed concern about managing challenging behaviour**

*“I regularly deal with pupils with challenging behaviour and have been physically attacked on several occasions. I was not supported by my head teacher and the pupil concerned was not sanctioned.”*

82% of respondents expressed concerned about managing challenging behaviour, with an almost even split between those who were ‘very concerned’, ‘concerned’ or ‘slightly concerned’. Some commented that excessive time spent dealing with behavioural issues was limiting opportunities to assist children with their learning. Others mentioned that school behaviour policies were not always followed through effectively, with poor communication between staff. Being excluded from school training sessions was also cited as a problem in being

equipped to manage behaviour effectively. Many TAs also reported feeling vulnerable and isolated when alone with whole classes or working in behaviour units.

In terms of violence from pupils, a third of respondents stated they were 'very concerned or concerned', nearly a third were 'slightly concerned' and just over a third were not concerned about this issue. Some respondents commented that they did not feel supported in dealing with aggressive behaviour from pupils, as management can be reluctant to confront parents. Some TAs also commented on the difficulties of dealing with the behaviour of parents, despite there not being a specific question on this topic.

Allegations from children, parents or carers were also a concern for three-quarters of respondents, with 17% being 'very concerned' about this issue. Comments demonstrated that some felt they would be unsupported if an allegation was made.

## **BULLYING FROM COLLEAGUES**

### **\*48% expressed concern about bullying from colleagues**

*"I've been off work for five months for work-related stress due to bullying and harassment."*

48% expressed concern about bullying from colleagues, with 26% being 'very concerned' or 'concerned'. 52.3% said that bullying from colleagues was not a concern. Comments revealed that bullying from management was the most common source, although other respondents reflected on the lack of bullying amongst staff and good team approaches.

## **EXCESSIVE COVER FOR TEACHERS**

### **\*68% expressed concern about excessive cover for teachers**

*"I am doing a lot of cover for teachers. It seems to be normal for TAs to be the back-up teacher (without training), usually last minute."*

68% expressed concern about excessive cover for teachers. 40% were 'very concerned' or 'concerned' about excessive cover for teachers. An issue emerging from the comments was that the difference between how TAs on different grades should be deployed was often ignored by the school. Higher level teacher assistants (HLTAs) mentioned that cover supervisors (whose main job is to manage a classroom when a teacher is absent ensuring that students remain on task with the work they have been set) were used to teach as well as cover, which was a threat to the HLTA role as well as being unfair on the cover supervisor. Many TAs commented on the cover they were expected to undertake during teachers' planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time, without being paid extra for this and without any training on how to manage a whole class. Many also referred to feeling compelled to spend their own time at weekends in preparation.

## **TRAINING AND CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD) OPPORTUNITIES**

### **\*75% expressed concern over lack of training and CPD opportunities**

*"Training is offered during development meetings but hardly ever followed up. There's little chance to progress from where I am at the moment."*

75% of respondents expressed concern over lack of training and CPD opportunities for teaching assistants, with an even split between those who were 'very concerned', 'concerned' or 'slightly concerned'. A common theme in

the comments was lack of funding for training, with the school focusing on training for teachers. Many referred to the lack of suitable and affordable options for TA training.

#### **EXAMPLES OF TAS' POSITIVE IMPACT ON ATTAINMENT**

*'Children punch the air and shout "yes" when they are called to come and do Catch-Up literacy with me.'*

*'I am the friendly face who does not judge, I calm students who have difficult behaviours.'*

*'It was an amazing feeling to be involved in his progress and attainment. You realise how important teaching assistants are.'*

*'Every child not only reached their targets, but developed a confidence with maths, which fuelled a love of learning.'*

*'Personally tutored seven students with profound special needs (SEN) who achieved five or more A\*-C at GCSE.'*

*'I deliver the daily speech and language for a child with verbal dyspraxia. He is just starting to talk.'*

*'Light bulb moments only happen for some children if they get 1-to-1 support, it's only possible with a TA in the classroom!'*

*'Autistic boy I support can now write coherently and with adequate spaces, and reasonably legibly.'*

*'My maths intervention work with a group of low ability Year 2 pupils raised attainment by several levels over 2 terms.'*

*'Two pupils are attending the mainstream primary full time with support. All achieved with TAs' commitment.'*

*'Making a difference in a child's life and improving his behaviour and study is a great work.'*

*'I supported two children with Down's Syndrome over four years. Pupil support assistants play a big part in primary education.'*

*'I make a difference to children as I deliver a reading programme and the results are noticed in all classroom work.'*

*'I ran a maths club and a pupil who asked for extra lessons with me achieved a C – two grades higher than predicted.'*

*'After attending an autism course, I put what I learnt into practice with a student who went on to pass several GCSEs.'*

*'The SEN students my friend and I supported for five years from Year 7-11 gained GCSE results that were NEVER expected.'*

*'A girl joined Yr 1 unable to read or write. After daily sessions she's become a confident reader who enjoys books.'*

*'A Yr 5 pupil said: "Mrs Smith says to get better at reading all you need to do is read, read and read! That's what I do.'*

*'The school's maths results went up 12% from last year because of small group intervention.'*

*'I worked in Y2 class with special needs children who achieved above expected levels.'*

*'I have been really lucky to have seen disillusioned students taking up the learning bug. It is a brilliant feeling.'*

*'To see their wee faces light up when they told me they have passed their test. This is what makes my job so worthwhile.'*

*'I run a sports team for the school, gardening club as well as running numerous booster classes in maths and ICT.'*

*'I teach English as an Additional Language; the school is recognised as a county leader, our GCSE results confirm this.'*

*'The differences I make are to children's health, wellbeing, safety and happiness this enables them to attain.'*

*'Children's reading levels are raised with daily or regular input from TAs.'*

*'I've been a big part of the team, teaching strategies to children to help them deal with anger and vulnerable home backgrounds.'*

*'I've lead early morning and after school booster Maths lessons. There's been significant progress in the children.'*

*'Pupil feedback has been positive. They say, "I learn better in a small group" and "I couldn't have done it without you"'*

**Issues raised in the survey will inform UNISON's ongoing campaign to speak up for teaching assistants.**

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