Bad Form: Behaviour in Schools, UNISON Survey 2016

Many school support staff say they are exposed to verbal and physical abuse, with aggression from pupils and their parents. This is having a profound effect on the health and morale of the school support staff workforce and, combined with the pressures of growing workloads, is contributing to a rise in anxiety and stress.

UNISON’s survey of 14,500 school members from across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland has revealed major concerns about behaviour in schools and suggests many are not fulfilling their duties on school behaviour and discipline.

There is a growing health and well-being crisis affecting schools, which UNISON believes could result in an exodus of hard-working and dedicated staff, unless urgent action is taken by the government, to ensure proper resourcing, and by school management, to ensure staff are trained and supported.

Behaviour in schools

In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the law requires each school to have a behavioural policy. This is to promote good behaviour, self-discipline and respect throughout the school, and prevent bullying.

Every school must communicate its policy to staff, parents and pupils at least once a year.

UNISON’s survey shows that nearly one in five (19%) say they work in a school where there isn’t an adequate behaviour policy. Another 15% indicated they did not know if their school has an adequate policy, which suggests schools are not publicising their behaviour policy properly to their own staff, let alone parents.

More than a quarter (27%) said their school did not offer adequate training to address pupils’ behaviour problems, while just under a quarter (24%) said they had not been given the opportunity to go on any appropriate courses. In addition, almost one in ten (9%) said they did not know if their school offered training.

The effect of cuts on behaviour

Cuts to staffing have a direct impact on behaviour. Increased class sizes and the use of supply staff have an adverse effect on their ability to manage pupils effectively. Schools need sufficient directly employed staff to ensure children who need extra support are given it and classes are not disrupted.

Cuts to training budgets have also had a marked effect. Staff need appropriate training and support staff are often not seen as a priority when training is given.

With an increasing number of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) attending mainstream schools, all pupils must be properly supported so that everyone is able to learn. It is vital that sufficient funding and resources are in place.
The experience of school support staff

Support staff workers in schools say they have experienced the following high levels of abuse in the course of their work in the past year:

- One in five (20%) have experienced physical violence at school, while over a third (34%) have witnessed it
- A fifth (20%) have experienced (and 30% have witnessed) verbal threats at school
- More than a fifth (27%) have suffered (and 32% have witnessed) other verbal abuse at school
- Almost one in seven (15%) have experienced (and 28% have witnessed) bullying at school

Teaching/classroom assistants affected most severely

The problems are even more acute for teaching/classroom assistants who can bear the brunt of bad behaviour, because they deal directly with pupils.

- More than half (53%) have experienced, while three quarters (76%) have witnessed, some form of physical violence at school
- More than half (53%) have experienced (73% have witnessed) verbal threats at school
- Nearly three fifths (60%) have experienced (69% have witnessed) other verbal abuse at school
- More than a third (38%) have experienced (79% have witnessed) bullying at school

Perpetrators of abuse

Most bad behaviour towards teaching assistants comes from pupils, but there is also a sizeable problem with violence, threats and abuse from parents.

Of those respondents who experienced some form of violence, almost all (98%) reported it had come from pupils, but almost one in 20 (5%) said it had come from parents.

Amongst those who reported threats, more than eight out of ten (85%) said these had come from pupils, while more than a quarter (26%) had experienced threats from parents.

In the case of teaching/classroom assistants who had been on the receiving end of verbal abuse, nearly eight out of ten (79%) said this came from pupils, while almost a third (31%) said they had been abused by parents.

Quotes from the survey

“Issues with behaviour have seriously increased – teaching assistants are covering classes, but are not given enough support. Behaviour support workers are overloaded with cases that means ‘minor’ special educational needs such as
dyslexia are not being addressed. Concerns about child protection and disruptive/violent behaviour are taking priority, and there is limited outside support available to help with these issues.”

“Mainstream primary schools are receiving more and more children who need additional support and some who have complex medical needs. This is causing extra strain on already strained staff. This means the disruption of lessons to the point that no child can learn until that pupil is removed. Staff are trying to do their best with little or no help. In some schools, there can be as many as half the class with additional-support needs and one teacher has to try to deal with all of this with some help from a classroom assistant.”

“We are very understaffed. We have to take staff out of class to cover other people’s breaks, lunches and sick days. This has a huge impact on teachers’ planning, and also on children’s behaviour. I work in an additional support needs unit and the behaviour in class is affected if they do not have the same people in class every day. This kind of class needs more support so the teacher can do their job. We are there to manage behaviour, teach, toilet pupils, do admin work and various other duties as required. It is not an easy job.”

“We are now expected to deal with violent behaviour and as we are a nursery based in the school, we are not given the same support as the main school. Behaviour support is prioritised for the school, leaving us at least one member of staff down because one of us has to supervise the violent children.”

Conclusions

School support staff have a right to be kept safe while they are at work and it is the responsibility of heads and school management teams to ensure this happens. School support staff can also face additional risks as they usually live in the local community alongside their pupils and their parents.

Schools are under enormous pressure to deliver higher grades and better OFSTED reports, whilst facing real terms funding cuts. The pressure on staff to deliver this whilst jobs are cut and workload increase is having a terrible impact on school support staff motivation.

Support staff paint a clear picture of how a lack of resources mean schools are not able to address behaviour issues adequately. Dealing with difficult behaviour in the classroom can cause major disruption, dominating the school day and undermining other pupils’ learning.

Our survey clearly shows that cuts in staffing – both at a school leadership level and from support staff – are having a serious effect on behaviour management in schools.

What needs to happen

Schools must do more to manage the behaviour of unruly and disruptive pupils to minimise the impact in the classroom.
More must be done to make it clear to parents that unacceptable behaviour will not be tolerated.

Each school’s behaviour policy must be up to date and rigorously enforced by senior managers.

Policies and procedures should take into account that staff may be at risk both inside and outside school.

Reporting systems need to be effective to ensure all staff are aware of any incidents, in case of further problems.

Training programmes need to be rigorous and should include all staff.

Schools should provide full support to any staff who encounter violence.