



Stars in our Schools – 2018 survey

Introduction

For the past five years, UNISON has been celebrating the unsung heroes in schools through [*Stars in our schools*](#), an annual day to celebrate support staff.

Every day, school support staff – teaching assistants, administrative workers, librarians, lab technicians, cleaners and caretakers – make a huge difference to the lives of nine million pupils in 30,000 primary, secondary and special schools across the UK. They are the *stars in our schools*.

This year, to celebrate the day and highlight employees' contributions, UNISON decided to look into the pastoral and emotional care provided by support staff in schools.

The findings reveal they play a key role in helping, and listening to, children and young people struggling with issues ranging from bullying, parental separation, anxiety and loneliness to grooming, abuse, self-harm and suicide, whether or not this is a formal part of their job.

About the survey

An online survey was sent out in November 2018 to school support staff across the UK, who are represented by UNISON, and whose roles typically involve supporting teaching, learning and pupil welfare.

A total of 3,094 completed it. The majority (78%) work in primary schools and 13% in secondary schools. The rest are in special schools and pupil referral units, which provide for children with more complex needs.

The majority are employed as teaching, classroom or learning support assistants (89%), or pastoral support workers, learning mentors and behaviour officers (5%).

Findings

Dealing with pupils' emotional issues

The majority of respondents (88%) said their role includes supporting children's social and emotional needs by having one to one conversations about their pastoral, welfare, and emotional issues.

While more than half (55%) said dealing with pupils' emotional issues was one of their job responsibilities, a third (33%) said it wasn't, but that pupils talk to them about such issues anyway.

This finding demonstrates the positive, trusting relationships often built up between pupils and support staff. It also highlights a frustration for some of these staff that they do not have capacity in their role to support the children more fully, as these respondents explain:

“It’s not part of my official role so I pass information to colleagues. My issue is I am trusted by pupils, but can’t give them the time.”

Special educational needs teaching assistant, secondary school, South East

“Pupils open up to me but I have to report any concerns to senior staff to deal with. But the child loses faith and doesn’t communicate with their trusted adult.”

Special educational needs teaching assistant, primary school, East Midlands

“Issues must be passed to a senior member of staff but sometimes these staff do not know the pupil as well as we do.”

Pupil support assistant, secondary school, Scotland

Pupils’ complex issues

The survey demonstrated the range of issues that pupils share with support staff. Respondents said pupils had opened up about school issues directly affecting them such as:

- Bullying (85%)
- Anxiety, stress and panic (66%)
- Loneliness (46%)
- Mental health issues (33%)
- Cyber bullying (31%)
- Pressure from parents to succeed (25%)
- Homework overload (23%)
- Suicidal thoughts (20%)
- Eating problems (19%)
- Racism (17%)
- Crime (12%)
- Sexual and gender identity (11%).

Other issues included loneliness, drugs, homophobia, children with speech difficulties, peer pressure, and friendship issues.

Beyond school, support staff also spoke of pupils opening up about home and life issues, such as:

- Parental separation (78%)
- Bereavement (70%)
- Family illness, either physical or mental (65%)
- Caring responsibilities (35%)

- Domestic violence (33%)
- Emotional abuse (27%)
- Parental or carer alcohol and substance misuse (26%)
- Physical abuse (22%)
- Sexual abuse (8%)
- Grooming (3%)
- Forced marriage (1%).

Others issues discussed included being in care, adoption, vulnerable housing situations, sibling rivalry, issues with parents and the police, or a having a parent in prison.

Impact on pupils

The survey also reveals the difference staff feel they make to pupils and their contribution towards the running of the school. The majority (91%) said the time they spend with pupils helps support their learning, builds children's confidence (88%), gives them someone to talk to (87%) and makes them feel safer in school (83%).

Three in five (60%) support staff said they thought their support made pupils feel less isolated. Another key role cited by staff was improving attendance (43%), and helping to keep children in school rather than be excluded (41%).

School support staff often provide pupils with someone to turn to, which makes them feel valued and listened to. Many commented on the importance of there being someone consistent in the lives of the most vulnerable pupils:

"I help them feel valued regardless of their achievements in school. That there is at least one person in their life that is consistent, safe and emotionally available."

Teaching assistant, North West

"I give them a trusted, consistent, and caring experience of life."

Teaching assistant in special education needs, West Midlands

In terms of the running of the school, support staff said they thought their involvement helped reduce pupils' anxiety in school (82%), raised pupils' expectations about what they could achieve (71%), and helped build their relationships with staff (61%). The end result was often better behaviour and a motivation to achieve at school.

Staff also believe that their presence helps improve pupils' behaviour in the classroom (80%), has a positive impact on their relationships with pupils (78%) and on the safeguarding of children (76%). They report that it also means a decreased workload for teachers (69%) and more positive links with parents (53%).

No time and nowhere to talk

Despite the range and depth of issues pupils are experiencing, more than half the support staff (56%) said they don't have the time, space or privacy to talk to children about their issues.

Time was the most commonly given reason, despite more than a quarter (28%) saying they work up to six unpaid hours a week – the equivalent of almost an extra day in school. The lack of time is often down to cuts in the hours they work and huge workloads, as a result of funding constraints on schools. For example:

“Because of government cuts, my hours have been reduced so we are now not given time for these vital issues.”

Learning support assistant, primary school, South East

“Due to budget cuts at school my role has been halved so time is very limited.”

Safeguarding manager, primary school, West Midlands

Even for support staff whose specific role is to deal with children's welfare, time is an issue:

“It's difficult to keep up my own timetable as I'm covering many other members of staff who are off. I have no spaces in my schedule that allow me to catch up with students if I've missed a session. It's hugely stressful, as most pupils have been referred for emotional well-being.”

Learning mentor, primary school

“It is my job role to do these sessions but I spend more time acting as a teaching assistant.”

Pastoral support worker, secondary school, North West

“I'm not assigned enough hours and it's a big primary school. They'd love for me to be full-time as the need is there but there is no money in our budget.”

Emotional literacy support assistant, primary school, South East

“My time is spread far too thinly, as I'm also the attendance officer/education welfare officer for the school, which means that my timetable has little capacity to complete the follow-up work.”

Senior learning mentor, primary school, Greater London

“The volume of pupils needing additional support and the level of poor mental health is at times overwhelming, and decisions have to be made prioritising pupils according to risk.”

Learning mentor, primary school, North West

“Due to the numbers of pupils experiencing a variety of social, emotional and mental well-being issues, combined with the lack of experienced staff

both in and out of school that pupils can access, I do not feel I can effectively support all those that need help.”

Pastoral support worker, secondary school, West Midlands

Many respondents also commented on the lack of suitable space in the school to hold confidential conversations with children where they wouldn't be disturbed, with school corridors and empty classrooms often having to be used instead of a dedicated room.

Cuts to pastoral and welfare staff

Despite the reports of all the positive contributions that support staff are able to make a third (33%) reported that their schools had made cuts to staff carrying out pastoral roles over the past year.

These cuts have taken various forms, including decreases in staff hours, employees not being replaced when they leave, redundancies and increased class sizes.

Other examples include schools saving money by using support staff to cover absent teachers rather than paying for supply cover, which take support staff away from their dedicated roles. As a result, many pupils miss out on valuable support, putting staff under even more stress:

“My hours have been reduced from 30 hours to 20, and I have to continuously prove what impact I am making. That’s because of the budget they aren’t sure whether they can keep me on.”

Learning mentor, primary school

“Staff leave and aren’t replaced, and others have been taken from pastoral roles and placed in classes as learning support assistants. The school says there is no budget for pastoral support anymore.”

Pastoral and behaviour manager, Yorkshire & Humberside

“The school’s pastoral mentors have been reduced from four to two. There were two specialised behavioural teaching assistants in the classroom. There are none now.”

Higher level teaching assistant behaviour lead, secondary school, South West

“Many teaching assistants have been made redundant in our school. We are now operating with just enough support for pupils with education, health and care plans. But this is not enough to provide the valuable pastoral and learning support for other vulnerable pupils, especially when staff are pulled out of class to provide cover for absent teachers or to invigilate in exams.”

Pastoral support worker, secondary school

Cuts to internal and external provision for children

When asked about what type of provision is available to staff to put in place to support pupils, it appears they rely heavily on existing internal networks such as school counsellors (61%), education, health and care plans (49%) and homework support (36%).

A few also mentioned referring pupils to internal emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs), child protection or safeguarding teams. Two in five (40%) had referred some cases to social services, 29% to mental health services, 15% to the police and 12% to charities.

Worryingly, 39% said that support service availability had decreased. Many talked about long waiting lists for referrals, particularly for mental health services (often referred to as child and adolescent mental health services, often referred to as CAMHS), a lack of funding and of staff – all made worse by a rise in the number of pupils needing help. Schools are being expected to fill gaps where services have been cut:

“It is harder and harder to make referrals to outside agencies, they either no longer exist or their thresholds are too high. I spend more and more time trying to fill the gaps.”

Parent link/mental health lead, South East

“As more local services are cut, schools become hubs of support. I describe us as the fourth emergency service.”

Pastoral support worker, South East

“Various children's services offered by the council either don't exist any more or are impossible to reach.”

Assistant learning mentor, South West

“A number of charities that we used to refer children and their families to no longer exist. We also had a long period of time that we were not allowed to refer cases to CAMHS. CAMHS closed their service to all non-critical cases for a year.”

Senior learning mentor, Greater London

As a result, 86% of support staff have gone home worried about a child's welfare, safety or emotional state. Almost a quarter (24%) said they go home worried every day, and the same number do so once a week. This rose to 27% for those who were worried once a month.

Impact on their well-being

Carrying this mental load can take its toll on staff too – 45% said they felt their well-being was supported by the school:

“There are excellent relationships between staff, plenty of support and training when possible.”

Teaching assistant, secondary school, Yorkshire & Humberside

"We have regular meetings for teaching assistants. My colleagues are friendly staff, there's good leadership, staff get-together regularly and we have daily team meetings."

Teaching assistant, primary school, South West

"The head is very approachable and supportive. When advice and moral support is needed there is someone I can turn to."

Higher level teaching assistant, primary school, South West

"I know I can talk to other members of the team. Mental health is a key priority in our school development plan."

Teaching assistant, primary school, North West

"I can speak to the head or the deputy if I am worried, upset or concerned. Counselling is available via referral if needed too."

Family liaison officer, primary school, South East

However, unfortunately 55% did not feel that their own well-being was particularly supported by the school:

"Teachers get supported but teaching assistants are left to deal with things. For example, if a teacher is struggling in class, support is put in place, but teaching assistants are expected to cover lessons with no support."

Senior teaching assistant, primary school, North West

"I feel over worked, under supported, not appreciated, under paid, I regularly have to miss breaks and lunch. There's also no communication from the senior leadership team, sometimes they don't even speak to me in the corridor or acknowledge I exist."

Learning support assistant, secondary school, West Midlands

"Whilst everybody is supportive, we are all at breaking point with no outside help on the horizon."

Pastoral support worker, primary school, South West

"I don't feel a priority at all. They just want me in and working regardless of how I feel or what is going on in my life."

Teaching assistant, primary school, North West

"If we have any concerns we want to discuss with the head teacher, we have to email her first as she discourages anybody from trying to catch her when she is actually in school."

Pupil support assistant, primary school, Scotland

"I only have a phone line to call. There are no return to work chats after illness and after a recent family bereavement I was spoken to in the staff

room rather than in private.”

Teaching assistant, primary school

Qualification and training

Nearly three quarters (74%) said they had formal qualifications directly relevant to their role in school. However, despite the obvious contribution that support staff bring to children’s well-being, one in five (21%) said they received no training on dealing with children requiring emotional support. An additional 46% said they received some but not enough. This finding is clearly of some concern considering the extremely serious nature of some of the issues pupils approach staff with.

Conclusion

The survey shows that support staff are often trusted adults and confided in regardless of whether this is expected of them in a formal capacity.

UNISON is concerned that as other council services are being cut back, schools are increasingly expected to fill the gaps. Yet just as their role has perhaps never been more crucial, school support staff are themselves being made redundant, potentially exposing some of the most vulnerable children to great risk. UNISON is calling on the government to urgently investigate the impact of school funding cuts on pastoral support in schools, and the impact this is having on pupil welfare.

Notes:

UNISON represents over 250,000 school support staff across the UK, including caretakers, janitors, cleaners, school cooks, catering assistants, lunchtime supervisors, administrative and finance staff, data managers, examinations staff, school business managers, teaching assistants, classroom assistants, cover supervisors, nursery nurses, library assistants, librarians, network managers, ICT technicians, food technicians, science technicians, design and technology technicians, welfare officers, attendance officers, family support advisers, learning mentors, and school crossing patrol officers.