



## **UNISON School Support Staff Survey Report 2025 - “Doing more with less”**

### **Introduction**

UNISON is the largest union for education support staff in the UK, representing almost 350,000 members - around 250,000 of whom work in schools. These staff are the backbone of the education system, ensuring schools run smoothly and pupils are supported to learn, thrive and feel safe. The 'whole school team' includes learning support, pastoral, technical, administrative, managerial and site-based roles - all essential to children’s education and wellbeing.

### **Executive summary**

UNISON’s 2025 School Support Staff Survey reveals a workforce under immense strain. Nearly 3000 school support staff across the UK - including teaching assistants and administrative, catering, cleaning and early years staff - shared their experiences. The findings reveal a deeply concerning picture of staffing shortfalls, rising workload, falling staffing levels, unpaid overtime, financial stress and a diminished sense of value. The data demonstrates that schools are understaffed and that this has real implications for staff morale, retention and ultimately pupil experience.

### **Key findings:**

- Staffing levels are falling: 59% reported fewer support staff and early years posts compared with a year ago.
- Staffing is inadequate: 78% said there are not enough staff to meet pupils’ needs.
- Pupil support is being eroded: SEND, pastoral, administrative and technical support have all been reduced.
- Workloads are escalating: 70% said their responsibilities have grown and 61% do unpaid overtime.
- Pay is low: Over half take home less than £1400 a month.
- Recognition is lacking: Only 46% feel valued by school leadership; 7% by government.
- Retention risks are high: One in three are actively seeking work elsewhere.

Respondents’ comments describe a workforce doing more with less, struggling to maintain standards while budgets shrink and responsibilities grow. The findings show that current pressures are not sustainable - for staff, schools, or pupils. They highlight the urgent need for national investment to stabilise the school workforce and protect pupils’ learning. The forthcoming School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) provides an important opportunity for support staff to have a stronger voice in addressing these issues, but it must be backed by the funding required to deliver real change.

## **FULL REPORT**

### **Survey context and methodology**

The survey ran between 10 and 24 October 2025, receiving 2951 responses from school support staff across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Questions covered roles, contracts, pay, workload, staffing changes, feelings of value, and career intentions. A majority of respondents worked term-time only (62%), and 37% were part-time. The respondents were from a range of settings:

- 57% primary
- 23% secondary
- 10% special
- 4% maintained nursery
- 4% other early years
- 1% all-through
- 1% pupil referral units

They also worked in a wide variety of roles, grouped as follows:

- 61% teaching and learning support (e.g. teaching assistants, cover supervisors)
- 10% administration & management (e.g. data, attendance, admin and finance officers, school business professionals)
- 7% early years practitioners
- 5% facilities (e.g. site staff, caterers, cleaners)
- 6% pupil support & welfare (e.g. learning mentors, family support advisers, lunchtime supervisors)
- 5% specialist & technical (e.g. librarians, technicians, sports coaches)
- 6% in roles outside of these categories

This breadth of responses provides an overview of the experiences of support staff working across different phases, roles and contract types in UK schools.

### **Fewer posts and reduced capacity**

Nearly six in ten respondents (59%) said support-staff numbers had fallen in their school over the past year. This means fewer adults supporting pupils, running clubs, covering classes or managing essential admin. Only 6% said numbers had increased.

The vast majority (83%) said posts were not replaced when staff left, making this the dominant reason for falling staff numbers. A smaller proportion (15%) reported reductions in contracted hours, while 8% cited redundancies. Other reasons mentioned in written comments included the non-renewal of temporary or fixed-term contracts, difficulties recruiting suitable staff and budget-related staffing freezes. Staff sickness or long-term absence not being covered, along with restructuring and role reallocation within trusts or

local authorities, were also reported. Taken as a whole, this indicates that falling staff numbers are driven primarily by financial pressure rather than planned workforce change.

“In the last two years, we have lost two student counsellors, a careers officer and four learning support assistants. None of these roles have been replaced.”

“We are currently on a 'recruitment freeze' as the school is in a very precarious financial position”

“I have to plan my maths interventions at home as the inclusion team has lost 8 teaching assistants this year and school can't afford to replace them”

“We have been advertising for more staff but cannot recruit, possibly due to near minimum wage offered.”

“We've lost three TAs this year and haven't replaced any. The work hasn't gone away.”

“If staff are replaced it's for fewer hours than previous post holder to save money”

These reductions inevitably increase pressure on remaining staff and reduce the support available to pupils.

### **Inadequate staffing levels and increasing pressure**

78% said staffing levels are not adequate in their setting. Respondents described working whilst understaffed, constantly firefighting and covering multiple roles simultaneously, leaving little stability or capacity for planned support.

“There are not enough staff to cover absences. Always running short. Staff on their knees. Morale low.”

“We are constantly short-staffed. It's a daily struggle.”

“We are constantly changing what we do each day to try and cover where the need is greatest. You never know what you're doing or what you are expected to cope with.”

“Staff shortages impact on the workload and pressure of the staff in the team. This sometimes leads them to go off on long-term sickness leaving the team even more short staffed and over-worked.”

Even where headcounts have not fallen, many said the intensity and complexity of pupil needs have grown, especially in settings with high numbers of children with SEND or medical requirements. Respondents described schools relying heavily on goodwill, with staff plugging gaps through unpaid time and personal commitment. This ongoing shortfall has implications not only for staff workload but for pupil learning, safety and wellbeing.

### **Impact on pupils and staff**

Respondents overwhelmingly agree that staff shortages are having a serious negative impact. A large majority reported multiple consequences across learning, wellbeing and safety: 94% said pupils are not getting the help they need and 89% said learning and progress are suffering. Similarly, 89% agreed that fewer staff mean pupils receive less emotional, pastoral, or wellbeing support. Over three quarters (77%) said shortages make it more difficult to keep pupils safe and properly supervised, while nearly 60% agreed that the overall environment - such as cleanliness, organisation and maintenance - has been affected. The strongest consensus was around workload: 95% of respondents agreed that staff shortages have increased workload and pressure across all roles.

“Because of staff shortages I am now covering lunch duties instead of holding space for SEND children who can't cope outside. This means that they are left in the playground with nowhere else to go”

“Support staff are asked to cover for absences... children miss out on interventions, speech & language programs etc.”

“Continuing staff shortages are affecting the wellbeing of staff... but also have long term negative effects on our children... those who need support (especially without an EHCP) are not getting the help they need.”

“Staff shortage has a major detrimental effect across the whole school, affecting kids' behaviour & staff morale and wellbeing.”

“It is heartbreaking to see children not getting the support they need due to lack of staff”

“Individuals are picking up extra work from colleagues not replaced. All staff are on their knees!”

The findings make clear that support staff shortages compromise not only day-to-day operations but also undermine pupil progress and reduce intervention work. They also leave remaining staff exhausted, overstretched and unable to provide consistent, high quality support.

### **Unpaid and excessive working hours**

Unpaid overtime is now the norm for most support staff. 61% reported working beyond their contracted hours each week, while only 39% said they never do so. Of those who work extra hours, most do one to two hours weekly (32%), but around one in six said they work three hours or more, and 5% work six or more unpaid hours.

Many said the extra time is spent preparing lessons, managing behaviour plans, catching up on admin or supporting children with complex needs. These findings highlight the scale of hidden and unpaid work that keeps schools running, despite staffing shortages and rising pupil needs.

“It's a given in schools that all staff regularly work beyond their contracted hours, it's just not timetabled and therefore not visible. School would not function without hundreds of hours per term being worked by staff - unpaid.”

“I regularly work outside of my working hours to keep on top of things as I do not get the time in school hours to complete these tasks.”

“I feel staff shortages in the school mean that we are all expected to do more 'for the good of the students/school' but without any extra pay or thanks”

“I discussed being paid for an extra hour a day for essential admin time with my exec head and was told that they either pay me or heat a classroom – but can't do both.”

“I attend a weekly staff meeting after my hours. This is mandatory. I am also expected to complete any online learning in my own time.”

“Never get away on time.”

Unpaid hours are most often seen as unavoidable rather than exceptional. The expectation that staff absorb additional work without compensation is contributing to exhaustion, low morale and the risk of staff leaving the profession.

### **Expanding roles and responsibilities**

70% said their job has expanded in the past year. Many now cover teaching, pastoral, safeguarding and medical duties (see [UNISON's campaign on health needs in schools](#)) well beyond the scope of their original role, often without additional pay or recognition. The combination of increased responsibilities and stagnant pay has left many feeling taken for granted and undervalued. Staff described doing teacher-level work on support staff pay, with blurred role boundaries and unrealistic expectations becoming commonplace.

“Cut backs means I am doing two jobs in one: a general TA and a 1-to-1 for a number of children who need specialist care.”

“I have had a number of additional responsibilities added to my role with no change to pay. Everything comes under ‘ad hoc responsibilities’.”

“More and more duties have been added to our roles. More nurse/ pastoral/teaching duties have been added to our role.”

“I am an early years practitioner. The definition of that is, parent, babysitter, educator, toilet training, social worker - all of which I have to do but didn't train for or apply for.”

Respondents repeatedly highlighted that additional duties are being absorbed informally, without job evaluations, training or revised contracts. This informal expansion of roles appears to have become embedded in schools, creating concerns about workload, professional boundaries and the quality of support being provided.

### **Low pay and insecure work**

The survey results confirm that low pay remains a defining feature of school support staff work. Over half (54%) of respondents take home less than £1400 per month after tax, and only a small minority earn more than £1800 (16%). Many explained that pay has not kept pace with inflation or the cost of living, leaving them struggling to cover essentials. For many, pay has reached the point where the job is no longer financially sustainable.

“I cannot afford to stay in this employment. I did have a 2nd job but was working almost 70 hours per week and burnt myself out.”

“Although I love my job and the children I work with, I cannot afford to keep doing it for this pay.”

“Sadly I have just handed in my notice due to unreasonable expectations and responsibilities at just over minimum wage payscale.”

“As the money is so poor, many school staff have more than one job. This can be very challenging for family life.”

“I have worked in education for nearly 25 years and I have to work two jobs to pay bills and survive.”

“We have no permanent contracts available even though some workers have been in the setting for over 10 years. Job security is a big issue at present.”

“Can't afford to be working this amount and just bringing home £1400. My 18 year old daughter is on a lot more than me working in retail.”

Staff working term-time only were particularly affected, with many pointing out that their actual annual income is far lower than headline pay rates suggest. The comments underline a sense that school support roles are not financially viable for many long-serving staff, particularly single parents and those in part-time positions. Low pay is pushing committed support staff to the brink, forcing some to seek additional jobs or leave the sector entirely.

### **Feeling undervalued and impact on wellbeing**

Fewer than half (46%) feel valued by school leadership; 12% by local authorities or trusts and only 7% by government. Most feel valued by pupils and colleagues. This reflects a divide between day-to-day professional relationships and the perceived lack of institutional or governmental recognition.

“The children appreciate us - that's what keeps me going. But leadership doesn't even say thank you.”

“Parents and children are always grateful, which makes the job worthwhile even if the pay isn't.”

“There are some members of staff who really make you feel like you're part of a team and that means a lot.”

“I've never felt like I'm the bottom of the pile more.”

“I do feel valued by my immediate team and the teachers I work with, but not by the higher management or government.”

“I feel valued by my headteacher and teaching staff but not by the government or LA.”

“I love my job, the pupils and my colleagues - I just wish the government recognised our contribution properly.”

When asked what would make them feel more valued, pay emerged as the defining issue. Nearly three quarters (74%) selected a pay increase as one of their top three choices. Over half (55%) said they wanted more support and appreciation from management, and almost half (47%) wanted their concerns to be listened to and acted upon. Around a third highlighted a reasonable workload (31%), and about a quarter pointed to payment for undertaking extra work (24%) or a better understanding of their role from colleagues (24%).

The open comments reinforce these priorities and add vivid detail. Many staff expressed frustration that their responsibilities have expanded - particularly around medical care, behavioural support, and SEND needs - without corresponding recognition or pay. Others spoke about being on temporary or term-time-only contracts, lacking job security, or being overlooked for progression opportunities. Respondents repeatedly mentioned the need for career structures comparable to teaching and training opportunities that lead to genuine progression. A consistent theme was the desire for respect and communication from leaders – not only being thanked, but being consulted, informed and treated as professionals.

Many staff described exhaustion, stress and declining mental health. They said colleagues are leaving and those who remain feel close to burnout.

“Just feel I'm a robot and not a person anymore.”

“Everyone is miserable and looking at leaving, most people cry most days. Mental health is at an all-time low and management don't care about anyone.”

“Staff shortages have had the largest impact upon the mental health of staff within my setting. Increased hours and increased number of children within the setting has resulted in staff becoming burnt out and unenthusiastic about coming to work.”

“Burnt out overwhelmed staff needing to take time off is occurring more and more.”

The cumulative effect is a workforce under strain, with low morale, limited recognition and rising mental health challenges, creating risks for retention and wellbeing.

### **Looking for alternative work**

Over one in three staff (38%) are actively looking for other jobs, and many more said they would leave if a better opportunity arose. This is particularly worrying as the results also show a highly experienced workforce, with the majority of respondents having worked in

their school for five years or more, and a significant number for over a decade. This depth of experience represents a major strength for schools, but also a growing risk if staff continue to leave.

“I have worked within care and education of children for almost 30 years but am looking to leave education completely as the workload and pace of day is now at an unmanageable level, and is having a detrimental effect on my health.”

“I find myself looking for a new job on a regular basis because I feel stressed so often.”

“I’ve had enough of working in the education sector and can only see working conditions and pressures getting worse. I can’t see me being able to continue to work in my current role and sufficiently maintain my physical, mental and emotional wellbeing for the rest of my working life.”

“I’ve been here 15 years. I’ve never seen morale this low.”

“I love my school, but I can’t do this forever on this pay.”

Long-serving staff said they are staying mainly because of their loyalty to pupils and colleagues, not because the job feels sustainable. The data suggest that schools are at risk of losing a generation of skilled and dedicated staff if pay, workload and recognition do not improve.

Comments reveal a divide between those approaching retirement who plan to “hang on” despite frustrations, and others who feel trapped by low pay, limited progression, and rising workload. Many said they love their job and the children they support but simply cannot afford to stay, citing the cost of living, unpaid summer holidays, and low hourly pay as major pressures. Others mentioned being drawn to better-paid or less stressful work.

A recurring theme was a sense of being “stuck” - tied to term-time contracts, local availability or caring responsibilities, yet disheartened by conditions in schools. Several said they are retraining or exploring new careers, while others spoke of leaving education altogether due to burnout, stress or feeling undervalued.

Overall, the findings suggest that while many staff remain deeply committed to their pupils and colleagues, financial strain, lack of recognition, and exhaustion are driving a growing proportion to look for opportunities beyond education - posing a serious risk to workforce stability.

Support staff considering leaving schools are most likely to look for jobs in administration (46%), the NHS (40%) and retail (31%), with smaller numbers exploring care work, hospitality and cleaning. Many of those selecting “other” said they still want to work with children - for example, in nurseries, special schools, or local authorities - but in better-paid or more supportive environments. The results suggest that while staff remain committed to public service, low pay, heavy workloads and limited progression are driving them towards sectors which they hope would offer greater financial security, clearer role boundaries and more reliable staffing levels.

## **Concerns about cuts ahead**

Looking ahead, there is widespread anxiety about the future. 77% of respondents said they are worried about further cuts to their school's budget in the next 12 months. Respondents fear that the financial situation will deteriorate further, leading to yet more post losses, increased workloads, and greater strain on both staff and pupils. They described a constant atmosphere of uncertainty, with every resignation prompting fears that posts won't be replaced.

"We've just discussed financial pressures so I'm worried about my job going in the future."

"My school leaders are very understanding but I feel like their hands are tied when they ask us to do more and more because we're so under-funded."

"All staff are worried something will fall through the cracks. I feel the continuing under-funding of our schools will have long term negative effects on our children and society as a whole."

The evidence suggests that staff expect further reductions in capacity, fewer support roles being replaced and increased pressure on those who remain.

## **Conclusion**

The survey exposes a deepening crisis among school support staff. Respondents report that staff numbers are falling, workloads are increasing and many are working unpaid hours to keep schools functioning. They feel undervalued and underpaid - yet remain dedicated to the children they support. This is not only a workforce issue - it is about the ability of schools to provide the support and stability children need to learn and thrive.

UNISON calls for adequate funding for schools to replace support staff posts, fully funded pay rises for all school support staff and measures to ensure staffing level reviews include support roles. Action is needed to retain the skilled support staff who underpin children's learning, safety and wellbeing, and to prevent further erosion of the vital support that makes effective education possible. It is hoped that the forthcoming School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) will provide a vehicle for school support staff to have a greater voice in resolving these issues, but it must be backed by the funding required to deliver real change.

For more information about the survey, contact [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk)

November 2025