

The Guardian roundtable in association with Zurich Municipal

Under scrutiny, underappreciated

Cowed by Ofsted pressures and the expectations of governors and heads, teachers are abandoning the profession in their droves. But is there room for more support amid all the accountability? **Victoria Neumark reports**

Balancing work and life is their biggest challenge, teachers say. They need school leaders to help them reconnect with the joy of teaching when Ofsted or unrealistic targets squash their space to reflect and develop, a Guardian roundtable, held in association with Zurich Municipal, heard.

Attendees discussed the pressures facing teachers and how schools can best counteract them. "Wellbeing is a massive issue," said Tilden Watson, head of education at Zurich Municipal, "not just for us, but for everyone who cares about education."

As the education system changes shape, some schools find inventive ways to nurture their workforce, but others suffer high staff turnover and are accused of bullying, participants said. Official figures show suicides among teachers rising year on year, although successful schools pursue positive measures such as the Investors in People kitemark and budgeting for professional development.

Staff wellbeing is crucial in turning a school around, said Emma Kell, newly in post at Francis Combe academy, a Watford school that has been losing 40% of its staff every year. Yet it is hard for headteachers to support staff, she said, while satisfying a punishing Ofsted schedule of paperwork on improvements.

Meeting targets and preparing for Ofsted inspections were the two main factors affecting teachers' mental wellbeing, said Nansi Ellis from teachers' union ATL, citing the ATL's recent survey of more than 900 teaching staff. Pressure put on teachers by leaders was a close third.

Julian Stanley, from the Teacher Support Network charity, added: "It doesn't help that language from the government changed radically in 2010. [There's been] too much talk of 'bad teachers' and 'bad teaching'. It's not just that the system changed - the language has also changed, so that teachers don't feel supported."

Constantly being held to account worries teachers, panel members agreed. But Graham Lacey, executive principal of Southbank International school, a large independent school for 3- to 18-year-olds serving 78 nationalities, caused controversy. "If we want to maintain our status and stay respected as a profession," he said, "we've got to be prepared to be accountable, as others are."

Levels of accountability

Peter Earley, from the Institute of Education, challenged Lacey's views: "We are accountable to the children and/or their parents. We all accept that. The issue is not accountability. It is high-stakes accountability." High-stakes accountability is when everything a teacher does is under the microscope of reputation: locally, in the media, and to government.

Accountability can be used to cloak victimisation by school managers, warned Coleman Doyle, citizenship and community co-ordinator at River House school. "Teachers really fear this idea of accountability - it just seems to be about blame, especially in the past four years," Doyle claimed that frontline teachers don't trust management to protect them. "There are many bullies out there. Teachers are afraid for their job."

While teachers feel pressure, education



Teachers need to feel supported by managers and valued by society, but some accountability is inevitable Photograph: Alamy

managers ought to shield them, said Peter Downes, retired headteacher and Liberal Democrat education spokesman. Downes saw bullying as one inevitable result of the demise of local authorities, leaving teachers at the mercy of target-driven school managers. But Nick House, head of Greenshaw high school, saw this as an opportunity. "We should be doing better locally, to create our own systems that are accountable but are also humane."

Earley added that schools were polarised between two systems of management - a hard-nosed, target-driven one and a more humane model. There was no research, as yet, he said, to show which delivered the better results, but governors

might need to step in as good employers to evaluate workload against staff wellbeing.

Watson, vice-chair of his children's primary school for the past four years, said governors with an overly aggressive business perspective turn meetings into an audit committee. General anxiety about league tables and Ofsted ratings can drive governors to berate rather than support staff. "Parents' expectations can be staggering," said Watson. Lacey agreed that heads need to manage parental expectation, citing one mother who rang him 10 minutes after her 17-year old daughter had dropped one grade on her latest essay.

But even if managers do shield staff from external pressures, they are

vulnerable to their own conscientiousness, said Ross McGill, assistant principal at successful inner-London comprehensive Greig city academy. Doyle added that the summer break seems long but he took only one week's holiday: the rest was spent preparing lessons. One maths teacher at Greenshaw gives revision classes for two hours every day after school, voluntarily. Such dedication actually increases pressure, by constantly raising expectations.

Good leaders help staff balance work and life. "We encourage staff to go home at the end of the day," said McGill. "We provide breakfast at the 7am staff briefing." Gestures such as running wellbeing weeks - and even organising staff's dry-cleaning

- make teachers feel that leaders support them, said Caroline Hoare from the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST).

Nevertheless, one in four newly qualified teachers leaves in the first five years, according to DfE figures; and some London schools lose 40% of their staff each year, according to Sara Bubb, from the Institute of Education.

No business organisation with a 40% attrition rate would last long, Watson stressed. "You invest in all that training, mentoring, resilience training: what throw it away?" Although studies show that investing in teachers' professional development improves students' results, it remains a low priority in many schools. "The time for reflection seems to have gone missing," said Stanley.

"We need to slow down and reflect on what we are doing. We build it into daily sessions with our kids, but not with our staff," added McGill. Staff counselling seems to be costly under tight budgeting, even though it is, Kell testified, highly effective.

Bubb urged that resilience needs to be built into teacher training. Teachers have to learn to cope with the everyday intensity of classroom emotions, from pupil throwing tantrums to teachers despairing at lessons going badly.

"We've had two members of staff who have had problems," said House. "We've helped them, we've reduced their time tables to almost zero for a while; we've invested in them, the system has invested in them, for decades. We're not going to lose them."

The panel was enthusiastic about contributory sabbatical schemes, where teachers take a term out to study or exchange with a school abroad. It cost little, since staff pay into it, and benefit the whole school when the teacher returns reinvigorated.

Status problems

Without such positive inputs, low status discourages many teachers out of the profession - a disillusioned teacher calls the Teacher Support Network charity helpline every 20 minutes, said Kell - and the more staff a school loses, the worse its reputation becomes. Although some schools try to overcome bad reputations by offering extra pay for teachers who promise to stay, Doyle said that teachers see cash incentives as marking a school out as one "you wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole".

Money is much less important to teachers, Hoare said, than "the power of informal affirmation, which costs nothing". Bubb added: "We need to be looking at supporting our staff, listening to them and boosting them up." Good, old-fashioned appreciation from school leaders is the best counter to the attacks on teachers in the media - both traditional and social that put teachers under constant pressure to justify their work.

But how can managers help teachers retain their joy in teaching? Schools need to collaborate and share good practice, said Siôn Humphreys from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT). Professional development and staff counselling are worthwhile investments, not negative costs. "Good teachers are happy," said McGill. "But if they don't have a chance to breathe, they can't be happy."

Watson explained how Zurich Municipal focuses on mitigation and that managing these issues early is critical to success and Humphreys suggested that school redeploy staff nearing retirement as mentors for stressed younger colleagues - so called "grandfathering". NAHT and other unions can help plan career transitions even, if need be, out of education.

Given that teachers may see changes whether from new curriculums or Ofsted regimes, as threats, leaders must talk with staff, informally and in staff forums, Hoare advised. Trying - and failing - to reach Ofsted "outstanding" can terrorise staff better to agree on high, but realistic, standards, the panel agreed.

If we want good schools, Hoare summed up, leaders must articulate their core values - and value their staff.

At the table

Kerry Eustice
(Chair)
Content manager,
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Coleman Doyle
Citizenship and
community co-
ordinator, River
House school

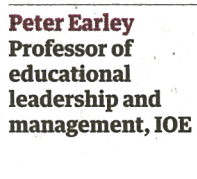
Caroline Hoare
Director of people,
Girls' Day School
Trust



Emma Kell
Assistant
principal, Francis
Combe Academy



Sara Bubb
Department of
early years and
primary educa-
tion, Institute of
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Peter Earley
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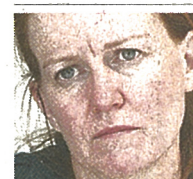
Nick House
Head of school and
PiXL associate,
Greenshaw high
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Graham Lacey
Executive
principal,
Southbank
International



Peter Downes
Councillor,
Cambridgeshire
County, and vice-
president, Lib
Dem Education
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Nansi Ellis
Assistant general
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Teachers and
Lecturers



Siôn Humphreys
Policy adviser,
National
Association of
Head Teachers



Ross Morrison-McGill
Assistant vice-
principal, Greig
City Academy

Key discussion points

● Accountability: to whom are teachers accountable? Children, parents, school management, Ofsted, the secretary of state, the general public, the media? Or are their own consciences the hardest taskmasters of all?

● Are the biggest pressures internal or external? What can management do to alleviate those pressures and help teachers cope with the workload?

● Professional development: should schools spend on this as an investment