

Well-being and burnout in teaching: Understanding the issues

Teacher resources: 1



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Understanding the issues

We invited teachers to respond to the notion of 'burnout'

In talking about the mental, emotional and physical effects of the job, teachers used a range of metaphors - some vivid or even visceral - to illustrate how they have felt during their working lives.

Teachers sharing how they have felt

Sharing these descriptions and hearing other teachers' experiences can be cathartic.

In the summer of 2019 and the spring of 2020 we held roundtables at the University of Leeds with teachers from different sectors, union representatives from the NEU and NASUWT, senior education leaders, and human resources professionals, to gather their perspectives on the challenges around teacher wellbeing. These events took place before the COVID-19 crisis, and the issues raised are likely to be even more acute now.

Many of our participants had left the teaching profession as a result of their experiences. Other had moved to another school or started doing supply teaching in an attempt to find a less pressurised environment in which to work.

"Burnout sounds weak. Why not say what it is – overwork."

"I think 'broken' is a better way of putting it than 'burnout'."

Feeling exhausted, stressed, or on the verge of quitting teaching?

You are not alone, and it is not your fault.

"I feel like my flame has been extinguished and it's whether I want to bother to relight it."

"I feel desiccated, like sucked dry of everything."

“The job just wasn’t doable in waking hours.”

Causes of burnout

Workload

High workloads and long hours are seen as the norm in teaching.

Teachers are usually happy to do what they think is necessary if it is work they think will contribute to their effective teaching and their pupils’ learning.

Tasks which teachers most feel are a burden are those which managers require them to undertake, and which they regard as meaningless or only contributing to accountability systems.

Pupil tracking - the continual collecting of pupil data - is top of the list of burdensome and excessive workload.

Support for teachers

Your teacher union can give you advice about workload impact assessments in your school. Contact your workplace rep or the national helpline.

The Department for Education, working with school leaders, teachers and other sector experts, has done a considerable amount of investigation into workload, and has produced a toolkit of practical resources to reduce workload, which you could take to your manager:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-workload-reduction-toolkit>

Causes of burnout

Punitive management

It is known that some teachers are 'managed out' of schools.

Teachers told us they had been encouraged to 'move on' to avoid being managed out on capability grounds.

This could include teachers who are simply seen not to fit with the head's vision for the school.

Others told us that they had seen a change in managers' behaviour towards them, after they had said no to a request or disagreed with something.

Teachers described being 'set up to fail', with unrealistic deadlines and targets they could not hope to achieve.

"It's the worst thing. The inability to question or say no. Having red lines is a great idea, but we are unable to do it. Unable to say no."

Support for teachers

Your teacher union can give you advice about what to do if a manager speaks to you about capability procedures or informal support plans. Contact your workplace rep or the national helpline.

Keep evidence of anything that happens which you think is not right. It could prove to be important later on.

“ ‘Do this. Make it work.’

You can't just tell them it won't work - they tell you you have to make it work.”

Causes of burnout

Lack of communication and consultation

Senior leaders are increasingly seen as remote from the classroom. They may, especially in multi-academy trusts, have come from a business background and they may not relate easily to what it is like to be a teacher.

HR is also seen as remote from teachers, and as being unlikely to see things from their point of view.

Teachers feel that senior leadership generally want to demonstrate their vision and impose their way of doing things on a school.

Teachers find that the goalposts are moved or deadlines altered when they are asked to do something. They feel they are not listened to when they make their voices heard. They feel disrespected and without agency.

Support for teachers

Your teacher union can give you advice about what to do if you feel that something is being imposed on you without due consultation.

Contact your workplace rep or the national helpline.

Causes of burnout

Accountability

Accountability and performance management, especially where managers conflate these with quality assurance, are seen as key factors in making workplaces pressurised for teachers.

Teachers who feel they are constantly being monitored do not feel comfortable. They feel restricted because they are looking over their shoulder all the time.

Teachers feel that their job should be about building relationships with pupils, engaging them with learning. Instead, their school's focus may be on meeting performance targets.

Support for teachers

Your teacher union can give you advice about what to do if you feel you are being placed under too much pressure by excessive monitoring in your school. Contact your workplace rep or the national helpline.

There are guidelines about the amount of observation your employer is permitted to undertake per year.

You should also take advice on what to accept as individual targets in your performance management cycle. Your pay and your career should not depend on pupil outcome data.

“That sense of accountability...you’re trying to do your best for the children all the time and you’ve got 2 customers. The children who are in front of you and want interesting, engaging lessons and to be enthralled....but you’ve got management breathing down your neck saying you must make sure you do tests to make sure they’ve learnt things.”

“It’s me, it’s me. I can’t cope with this. This is how (the job) is, but I can’t cope with it.”

“a significant number of teachers are walking around in a fog”

Causes of burnout

Blaming yourself

Teachers often come into the profession to “make a difference”, “help young people”, “do something meaningful with my life”. There is a sense of vocation, of mission, of value.

When the job does not live up to this aspiration, teachers have a tendency to think they have done something wrong. Something has gone wrong, and it must be their fault.

It is not your fault.

Often, you are carrying the responsibility for young people, but lack the autonomy that you need in order to care for them in the way you think is right.

COVID-19 has resulted in increased pressure and stress for teachers, placing even greater responsibility on teachers, not only to teach, but also to provide pastoral care to their pupils, and sometimes to their families too.

Support for teachers

Your teacher union can give you advice about what to do if you feel that work is negatively affecting you either mentally or physically. Contact your workplace rep or the national helpline.

If you feel that teaching is having such a negative impact on you that you want to leave the profession, you are not alone.

In a recent survey, the Education Support Teacher Wellbeing Index (2019) found:

74% of education professionals considered the inability to switch off and relax to be the major contributing factor to a negative work/life balance

57% of education professionals have considered leaving the sector over the past two years due to pressures on their health and wellbeing

78% of education professionals have experienced behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms due to their work

71% of education professionals cited workload as the main reason for considering leaving their jobs

49% of education professionals considered their organisational culture had a negative effect on their mental health and wellbeing

Leaving teaching

Leaving teaching might be the right thing for you to do, to regain your mental and physical wellbeing and to re-establish your work/life balance.

Some people pick up supply work while they find out whether they still want to be a teacher. Some people change career altogether, and never look back.

Getting help

Contact [NASUWT](#) 03330 145550 or [NEU](#) 0345 811 8111.

Moving to a different school

Some teachers find that moving to a different environment can help them to regain their sense of perspective and rebuild their love of teaching.

This may depend on finding a school whose culture aligns with your values.

Do your research. Ask around. Look at turnover in a school before applying.

[Education Support](#) is a UK charity supporting the wellbeing and mental health of education professionals. Their helpline is 08000 562 561.