

# **Well-being and burnout in teaching: Why are some teachers happier than others?**

**Teacher resources: 2**



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## Understanding the issues

Some schools and colleges are being run and led in a way which seems to avoid some of the problems reported elsewhere.

### **We asked teachers to say what they needed from their school leadership**

What do teachers say enables them to feel supported in their professional lives, and to maintain good mental health?

### **We asked school leaders to tell us what they felt they needed to do for their teachers' well-being**

How do effective leaders view their role?

During May and July 2019, and February 2020, we held a series of roundtables, and invited teachers and senior leaders from a range of sectors, as well as HR professionals and representatives from the NEU and NASUWT, to come to the University to talk to us about well-being.

Many of our participants had left the teaching profession as a result of their experiences. Others had moved to another school or started doing supply teaching in an attempt to find a less pressurised environment in which to work. Some, working under different leadership, had rediscovered their love of teaching.

*“The whole attitude, it all stems from the senior management.”*

Union official

*“Leadership is about looking at what needs to be developed and not changing things for the sake of it.”*

Primary head teacher

*“The secret of good leadership and good management is to forget about yourself.”*

HR professional

## Effective leadership for a happy staff

### Protect

The best leaders deflect trouble, and don't cause it. They shield their staff from external stresses.

They do what they need to do, in terms of the external pressures they are under, rather than transferring these pressures to their staff or even, as we know happens in some cases, using those external factors as levers to lean on their staff.

They know what is best for their own context, and do not try to impose inappropriate ideas or initiatives.

They know that the way to avoid work stress and keep teachers healthy is to focus on the important things: the children, and the staff.

Fruit in the staff room and yoga sessions are examples of what our teacher participants called "sticking plasters". These initiatives are considered to be mere gestures, and do not address the underlying problems.

*"In terms of supporting staff, it's very important for my staff to know that I've got their back."*

Primary head teacher

## Effective leadership for a happy staff

## Trust

Teachers generally know how to be teachers.

In schools where staff turnover is minimal, teachers are trusted, and the head teacher can develop what one called a “steady ship”.

Stability of the school community, of a team learning and developing together, is necessary for good morale and healthy well-being. Successful leaders have confidence in their teachers and in what they are doing in their classrooms.

Teachers who feel trusted will be more creative, and ultimately will be better teachers, than those who feel micromanaged.

*“Ask them regularly... I think that we consult well with staff... In the school improvement plan, staff can see their ideas, what they wanted, students can see it, the parents’ forum contribute, so that that’s how you get the buy into the community.”*

Secondary head teacher

## Effective leadership for a happy staff

Share

Staff need to be consulted about marking policies, time windows for sending and receiving emails, to take account of their concerns, views and suggestions, and to keep staff feeling in control of their own work.

Teachers need to talk to one another. They need a staff room or other space where they can meet, share their experiences, support one another, and develop a sense of community.

Schools where a spirit of community is encouraged and promoted are likely to have staff who enjoy a better sense of well-being.

Teachers who support one another learn from one another. Sharing good practice should, our participants felt, be a much higher priority in schools, because it enhances their professional knowledge and practice, and in turn raises the standards of teaching across the whole school.

*“The school development plan isn’t written by me in my office in August; it’s written by every member of the teaching staff has an input in it”*

Primary head teacher

## Effective leadership for a happy staff

### Value

Teachers need to feel valued. They say that the performativity agenda and audit culture, which they feel is judgemental, makes them feel anxious, and worried that they are being scrutinised for faults.

Managers who are patient, who allow expertise to develop over time, who enable their staff to develop, who understand that mistakes help us all to learn, and who value the expertise and experience of their staff, are more likely to help teachers feel confident in their work.

Older teachers often feel more vulnerable because they are more expensive. A good leader will recognise the importance of experience.

*“You can look at a school and how a school performs by the leadership that it has... that culture of positive leadership and coming through is great, and that what you can do to bring staff on and encourage them in the working environment that you can create.”*

Union official

## Effective leadership for a happy staff

### Care

School policies and expectations need to acknowledge the importance of work-life balance.

Good leaders recognise that their staff have a life outside school. They allow their staff time to go to their own child's assembly, and encourage teachers to take their PPA time at home, giving them some flexibility.

Senior leaders said they needed to consider each teacher's individual circumstances in order to look after their well-being. Expecting the same from every teacher or from every school is inappropriate.

A directed time budget needs to be in place and adhered to. If your school does not have a directed time budget, your union reps can help create one.

*"I do believe that if I'm happy and I've got a good work-life balance, then, you know, it's that culture, isn't it, across the school."*

Primary head teacher

Well-being needs to be embedded in the systemic and structural processes at the heart of a school's life.

## 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:

[NEU 0345 811 8111](tel:03458118111)

[NASUWT 03330 145550](tel:03330145550)

## 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.

## 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 there.

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