Introduction and background

Education Support is the only UK charity which provides mental health and wellbeing support services to all education staff and organisations. This report published by the charity provides key information about the mental health and wellbeing of education professionals and analyses trends over time. The data in the report is based on an online survey of education professionals drawn from YouGov’s panel. There was a total of 3,019 respondents; the sample included all job roles from senior leader to support staff across all phases of education.

Key points

Working in the education sector

- Respondents were given a list of 10 possible reasons for working in education and could choose up to 5.
- The most important reason which emerged was making a difference or having an impact on the lives of young people. The second most important reason was helping young people to achieve their potential, followed by the daily interaction with students.
- Using the same approach, respondents were asked what they disliked about working in education. Workload was the most commonly cited aspect which they disliked, followed by dealing with unnecessary paperwork and receiving poor pay. Other common themes which emerged in responses were dealing with poor pupil behaviour, government interference and poor school management.
- Thirty-three per cent of respondents overall reported working more than 51 hours a week and 68 per cent of senior leaders reported working for more than 51 hours a week. Twenty-eight per cent of senior leaders reported working more than 60 hours a week and 11 per cent reported working more than 70 hours a week.
- The workload findings in this report are similar to those in other recent studies. The TALIS report for the OECD found that full-time teachers in England in 2018 worked an average of 49.3 hours per week. The Teacher Workload Survey (TWS) 2019 found that working hours in 2019 were 49.5 hours for teachers and 55 hours for senior leaders.
- Seventy-four per cent of respondents cited an inability to switch off and relax as a contributory factor to a negative work/life balance. Other issues affecting the work/life balance were working long hours on weekdays (66%), not having time to be with family and friends (61%), working during the holidays (57%) and working during weekends (55%). It is, however, noticeable that the impact of all these factors on work/life balance has decreased over the last 2 years. The biggest decrease has been for working over weekends (67% in 2017 compared to 55% in 2019).
- Stress levels continue to be high amongst education professionals. Seventy-two per cent of respondents describe themselves as stressed, and just 27 per cent say that they are not stressed. The levels are higher than in 2018 (67%) and in 2017 (66%).
- Eighty-four per cent of senior leaders report being stressed; this figure has also increased over the last 2 years (80% in 2018 and 75% in 2017). Unsurprisingly, the highest levels of stress are reported by those working the longest hours.
- This year’s survey asked respondents to rate themselves for resilience, described as ‘the ability to adapt and recover after experiencing difficulties or challenges in life’. Senior leaders had the highest levels of resilience, with 72 per cent rating their levels as very or fairly high. The figure for teachers was 62 per cent.
- Of those staff with reported low or very low levels of resilience, 7 per cent were school leaders, 11 per cent were schoolteachers and 30 per cent were staff in other roles.
- As could be expected, staff with lower levels of resilience reported higher levels of stress.
- Respondents were asked how they coped with work-related stress. The most commonly ways reported were by eating food (51%, representing a small increase on the 47% reported in 2018), drinking alcohol (31%), and undertaking unnecessary spending (23%). Much less common were the use of drugs (4%), gambling (2%) and other methods (3%). Thirty-one per cent of respondents did not turn to any of these.
- Coping mechanisms vary according to job role. For example, senior leaders (35%) and teachers (30%) were more likely to use alcohol compared to those in other roles (25%).

Mental health and wellbeing

- In 2019, 34 per cent of education professionals (35% of schoolteachers, 33% of school leaders, and 31% of staff working in other roles) stated they had experienced mental health issues in the past academic year. This was slightly more than in 2018 (31%). Of those who reported they had experienced a mental health issue, 31 per cent attributed this to work, 51 per cent to both work and home issues and 15 per cent to their personal life.
Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) reported the most mental health issues, with 43 per cent reporting an issue in the past year.

Seventy-eight per cent of respondents reported that they had experienced at least one behavioural, psychological or physical symptom related to work. Of these respondents, 57 per cent said they had experienced behavioural changes, 52 per cent had experienced physical symptoms and 49 per cent had experienced psychological problems.

Senior leaders experienced more of all these symptoms compared to teachers and staff in other roles.

For those who experienced the above symptoms due to work, the top contributory factor was work/life balance, followed by excessive workload and difficulty with managing poor pupil behaviour. This latter factor was much more commonly cited by teachers (51%) than by senior leaders (36%).

Education professionals who had experienced symptoms because of work were asked to say where they turned for support. Forty-eight per cent turn first to family and friends, whereas 28 per cent would turn first to colleagues.

Seventeen per cent said that they do not speak to anyone about their problems.

Respondents who experienced symptoms were asked about the ways in which they cope. Forty-two per cent cited physical exercise, 32 per cent use mindfulness or meditation and 25 per cent turn to therapy or counselling. Twenty-three per cent turn to alcohol.

This year, respondents were asked about the impact of organisational culture on their wellbeing. Fifty-five per cent of senior leaders considered that the culture of their organisation negatively affected staff wellbeing, compared to 49 per cent of schoolteachers.

Overall, 57 per cent of education professionals had considered leaving the profession in the last 2 years. However, the figure was higher for senior leaders (66%) and for teachers (61%).

Those who had considered leaving the profession due to health issues in the last 2 years were asked to give their reasons. The 3 most common reasons for these staff were the volume of workload (71%), not feeling valued (65%) and the pursuit of a better work/life balance (64%). Other common reasons included unnecessary paperwork (59%) and a target driven culture (53%).

Impact of mental health issues on others

Behavioural, psychological and physical symptoms have a considerable impact on absences. Fifty per cent of staff who reported such symptoms had been away from work for a month or more over the academic year.

Nineteen per cent had been absent for up to 6 months.

Teachers who experienced mental health symptoms due to work were aware of the impact of their absence. Thirty-five per cent considered that their absence would have a negative impact on their students’ studies and 16 per cent thought that there would be a negative impact on the students’ results. Thirty per cent felt that their absence would have a negative effect on team morale.

Forty-nine per cent of education professionals felt compelled to come into work even when they were ill, a phenomenon which is known as ‘presenteeism’. Senior leaders were the group most likely to come in when ill (59%), followed by teachers (50%).

When education professionals experienced mental health issues at work, this could have an impact on others outside of work. For example, 48 per cent said that their personal relationships could suffer. Fifty-one per cent of senior leaders said that both their work performance and their relationships suffered.

Support available for staff

In 2019, a third of education professionals (32%) would turn to somebody outside of work first if they experienced mental health issues at work, which is the same as found in 2018. Thereafter they would speak to a colleague (25%) or their line manager (10%). However, more than a quarter (27%) of respondents would not speak to anybody about it. These respondents were asked to give reasons. Thirty-nine per cent said that they felt it would negatively affect people’s perception of them. Other reasons were that they preferred to seek support from people outside of work (30%) or that it would be seen as a sign of weakness (29) – this feeling was more prevalent amongst senior leaders and teachers. Twenty-six per cent felt that there was a stigma or feeling of shame associated with disclosing mental health issues. There was also a fear that others would not be supportive (19%).

Although education professionals in this year’s survey felt more confident about disclosing mental health issues, 60 per cent still said that they would not feel confident enough to disclose.

For those education professionals who did share their stress or mental health issue at work, the greatest reported benefit (55%) was that it gave them a perspective and helped them to realise that they were not alone. Thirty-one per cent felt that it had helped to restore confidence in their abilities.

Thirty-one per cent of education professionals felt that they had sufficient guidance about their mental health and wellbeing at work; this represents an increase of 5 per cent since 2018. There was a corresponding decrease in the number who felt that they did not have enough information and guidance (74% in 2018 vs 69% in 2019).

Forty-one per cent of education professionals (7% more than in 2018) felt that their organisations supported staff who had mental health problems well. There was a corresponding decrease in the number of staff who felt their organisations did not support them well, from 53 per cent in 2018 to 43 per cent in 2019.

The two most popular forms of support were access to Employee Assistance Counselling Services (which increased by 6% from 21% in 2018 to 27% in 2019) and talking to union staff which increased from 25% in 2018 to 27% in 2019.

When asked how the mental health and wellbeing of the workforce could be improved, more than half of respondents felt that managers could work more effectively with staff to reduce workload.

A well-implemented pupil/student behaviour policy was important to 27 per cent of professionals.

Thirty-five per cent stated that changes could be better communicated to staff in order to improve mental health and 30 per cent felt that the senior leadership team could be more approachable.

In 2019, 44 per cent of education professionals worked in a setting which had a mental health and wellbeing policy for staff. Forty-three per cent did not know whether they had a policy.