

Why Are Teachers Walking Out? The Leading Causes of Teacher Burnout

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In recent years, the news has regularly reported on the staffing crisis in UK schools. Despite the Department of Education's huge, "Your Future, Their Future" TV marketing campaign, the government has failed to hit its trainee recruitment targets for the past five years. And not only are fewer people joining the profession, but they're also leaving it in droves. The [number of women leaving](#) secondary schools increased by more than a quarter between 2012 and 2016. According to [TES](#), there are three times as many temporary teachers as there are permanent school teachers and there is a shortage of qualified staff across many secondary subjects, including Maths, Design and Technology, and Physics. The number of primary teachers has increased in recent years but still falls short of staff levels required. However,

teachers walking out due to burnout seems to be more of a problem for secondary schools. With [one in five teachers](#) planning to leave the profession in the next two years, we need to understand what's causing teacher burnout and how to stop it fast.

What Is the Impact of a Teacher Shortage?

When there is a shortage of qualified teaching staff, class sizes will increase, as teachers are required to cover a larger number of pupils. Bigger classes are much more difficult to manage and there are more likely to be behavioural issues, which interfere with teaching and learning. This, in turn, will negatively impact both pupil performance and teacher morale. A shortage of teachers in certain subject areas at the secondary level could also reduce the number of options pupils have to choose from, thus limiting their opportunities to develop their preferred careers. So why are so many teachers burning out and leaving the profession or signing off sick?

Excessive Work Hours

Despite the common perception that teachers enjoy far more holiday time than what they spend in the classroom, among the major teacher complaints are excessive workloads and long work hours. In a recent Teacher Tapp survey, 11% of teachers polled said that they arrive at school before 7 am and 35% are at work by 7.30 am. There was little difference between primary and secondary teachers. By the time the majority of the workforce arrive at their desks at 9 am, many teachers have already done several hours of work. When asked how many hours they worked in the previous day (a Tuesday), 65% of teachers said they work more than 9 hours, while 24% work for more than 11 hours. If we compare this to the standard working week in the UK, which is 37.5 hours – or 7.5 hours per day – it seems that many teachers are working significantly longer hours than the average. Unsurprisingly, 16% are unhappy with their hours and have difficulty switching off from work to sleep. 39% of teachers polled would like to decrease their working hours, a response that was given almost equally between male and female staff members.

Unhealthy Stress Levels

Almost [12 million working days](#) are lost in the UK each year due to work-related stress. This can seriously damage a person's health and lead to poor concentration, a lack of confidence, apathy, indecisiveness, depression, anxiety and more. Excessive work-related stress is one of the most common reasons given by teachers for their unhappiness or their decision to walk out. 57% of teachers polled recently felt that their stress levels are unacceptable for the job they do. There was little difference in the responses given by male and female teachers.

t.getElementById("datawrapper-chart-"+e)||document.querySelector("iframe[src*='"+e+"'"]"); t&&(t.style.height=a.data["datawrapper-height"][e]+"px"))}); Approximately 20% of all teachers polled said they lose sleep due to worry "most or all of the time", and there was little difference between those who are new to teaching and those who have been teaching a long time. Teachers who have been in the profession for over 20 years are slightly more likely to worry, which could be due to the fact that they are more likely to be in senior posts. When asked what causes stress, the top issues for classroom teachers and senior leaders alike were "workload and work-life balance" followed by "administrative tasks". !function(){use strict;window.addEventListener("message",function(a){if(void 0!==a.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var e in a.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.getElementById("datawrapper-chart-"+e)||document.querySelector("iframe[src*='"+e+"'"]");t&&(t.style.height=a.data["datawrapper-height"][e]+"px"))}}); Excessive work demands and stress also seem to make teachers reluctant to take time off to recover from illness. 37% of teachers polled said they had been ill over the past half-term but made their way into work regardless, compared to 13% who stayed home. This is likely to contribute to teacher burnout, as teachers are forcing themselves to work when they really need to rest. Interestingly, people who "strongly agree" their classroom is stressful are the most likely to feel ill but also the least likely to take time off. Supportive leadership seems to be a key factor in how well teachers manage their health both in terms of stress and other illness. Our recent poll shows that the more a person feels that their manager has unrealistic expectations, the more likely they are to be ill and take time off work.

Feeling Undervalued and Unsupported

We all want to feel valued in our jobs, both by our colleagues and wider society. Employees who feel unappreciated are more likely to have low morale and limited motivation to perform at their best. When asked by Teacher Tapp, "Do you agree that teachers are valued by society?", more teachers responded "no" than "yes". Teachers who strongly believe that they are not valued by society are more likely to experience burnout. !function(){use strict;window.addEventListener("message",function(a){if(void 0!==a.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var e in a.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.getElementById("datawrapper-chart-"+e)||document.querySelector("iframe[src*='"+e+"'"]");t&&(t.style.height=a.data["datawrapper-height"][e]+"px"))}}); However, 67% of teachers nevertheless felt that the stress and disappointments of the job are worth it, with senior leaders and head teachers even more likely to feel that the stress is worthwhile. It seems that the people with greater autonomy in their roles can accept the stressful aspects as part of the job and see them as worthwhile, but those with less authority have a tendency to view work stress negatively. How well stress is managed and how much it overshadows the value of the job is often affected by how supported a teacher feels within the school. Another encouraging finding is that the majority of 1,875 teachers polled felt that they can count on their colleagues for support in difficult situations "often" or "always". Teachers in outstanding schools were slightly more likely to have colleagues they can "always" rely on. !function(){use strict;window.addEventListener("message",function(a){if(void 0!==a.data["datawrapper-height"])for(var e in a.data["datawrapper-height"]){var t=document.getElementById("datawrapper-chart-"+e)||document.querySelector("iframe[src*='"+e+"'"]");t&&(t.style.height=a.data["datawrapper-height"][e]+"px"))}}); However, there is a clear need and desire for more support in accessing Continual Professional Development (CPD). 65% of teachers believed they still have more to learn as a teacher and 37% felt there are weaknesses in their teaching. This recognition of the need to continually develop as a teacher could be viewed in a positive

light, but schools and the wider school system need to support teaching staff by providing the time and resources necessary for CPD.

How Can We Stop Teachers Walking Out?

It seems the government and schools themselves have their work cut out for them. Burnout can be defined as “physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress.” Our Teacher Tapp poll results show that excessive work hours and stress are indeed major causes for concern and complaint among school staff. Teachers need to feel valued, supported and able to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Currently, this seems not to be the case for far too many teachers. Understanding what causes teachers to walk out is an important step on the road to finding a solution.

What are your feelings on the leading causes of teacher burnout? Contribute your thoughts and get more insights by downloading the [Teacher Tapp app](#).