

“Tempting more recruits won’t stop teachers leaving”

Steve Waters explains why banishing burnout is the only solution to the current retention crisis...

“I returned to work after the Easter break in 2016 and couldn’t enter my classroom. I had a panic attack, cried for what seemed like hours and got sent home. I couldn’t go in the next day, nor the next, and was signed off work.”

This account from Victoria Hewett – part of a 2018 interview published at the Pupil Progress website (pupil-progress.co.uk) – is typical of teachers suffering from burnout. The body and mind shut down, overwhelmed by attempts to cope with high levels of physical and mental exhaustion that will usually have built up over a long period of time.

Fortunately, Victoria – active on Twitter as @MrsHumanities – applied to a different school, and with the right support, was able to rekindle her love of teaching and continue developing a successful career. She has since set up a wonderful scheme called #Teacher5adayBuddyBox (teacher5adaybuddybox.com), where teachers send one another parcels to give them a lift. My own daughter benefits from the scheme, and loves both receiving and sending parcels.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Unfortunately, it’s still the case that some teachers become so worn down by the relentless accountability, workload and stress of the job that they end up leaving a profession they originally entered with much hope and promise. We’re in a retention crisis that we can only solve by focusing on the wellbeing and mental health of our existing teachers. Tempting more recruits won’t stop teachers leaving.

What we need are effective whole school approaches. Teachers can adopt strategies to reduce their own stress levels, but if their schools don’t take a share of the responsibility for causing that stress, there will simply be a series of

relentless individual battles that some teachers will inevitably lose.

According to Alexander Michel of the Association of Psychological Science, burnout occurs “When the balance of deadlines, working hours and other stressors outstrips rewards, recognition and relaxation.” (see tinyurl.com/burnout-brain).

Christina Maslach of the University of Berkeley in California has been researching burnout since the 1970s. She is the co-author, with Susan E. Jackson, of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which aims to assess individuals’ risk of succumbing to the three components of burnout – those being:

Emotional exhaustion – characterised by irritability, permanent tiredness, nausea, stomach pains and an inability to focus

Lack of personal accomplishment – self-blame, lack of confidence, feeling a failure, not doing a good job

Depersonalisation – cynicism, isolation, distancing from work and colleagues, blame and negativity directed towards others (including, in our case, pupils)

HOW TO TACKLE IT

In March of this year the DfE launched the Teacher Wellbeing Advisory Group, the purpose of which will be to recommend strategies for reducing workload and improving teachers’ wellbeing. It’s a move that should be welcomed, since the Group’s inclusion of representatives from the Chartered College of Teaching and the Education Support Partnership should help broaden its focus beyond matters of simply workload.

This is crucial, observes Maslach: “It is a common belief that there is just one dimension to job stress – work overload ... but in our burnout model, overload is only

one of six mismatches in the workplace.”

In other words, all six of these factors must be taken into account when tackling and preventing burnout. So what are they, and how might we define them within an educational context?

WORK OVERLOAD

When the quantity of work required exceeds the time available, or when a job is simply too difficult for an employee’s current resources.

LACK OF CONTROL

In terms of decision-making, access to resources, curriculum design, data collection and so forth.

LACK OF REWARD

Not necessarily just pay – social recognition, acknowledgement of effort, praise and thanks are just as important, if not more so.

ABSENCE OF COMMUNITY

As Maslach notes, “People thrive in community and function best when they share praise, comfort, happiness and humour with people they like and respect.”

LACK OF FAIRNESS

A commonly held perception that promotions are biased; indications of favouritism and/or the sense that some staff are more appreciated and thus more frequently rewarded than others.

CONFLICT OF VALUES

When your values as a teacher – the reason you entered teaching in the first place – don’t coincide with those of the government, which the school promotes over your own.



PREVENTING BURNOUT

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (see tinyurl.com/hswa-74), it's every employer's duty to minimise stress and mental ill health while providing support to their employees - which in schools, can effectively mean mitigating the adverse impacts of government policies, strategies and directives. Your school can achieve this, however, by using Maslach's approach.

The first step is to place the aforementioned six factors in the order in which they're having impact on staff wellbeing, from greatest to least. You can do this by either surveying staff individually and anonymously, or during professional development meetings, where the different factors can be provided on sets of cards for pairs or groups to move into position.

The next step is to ask staff why each of those factors might be causing burnout while noting their responses - some examples of what you might hear can be found in the 'Possible burnout causes' panel.

After this, draw up an action plan for how you intend to tackle these causes, circulate it to staff for anonymous comment and begin to implement it. Be sure to monitor the impact it's having as you go, using short, anonymised

online surveys.

Once this work has concluded, evaluate its impact and have your staff rank Maslach's six factors again. If there's been any progress, those factors that previously had the greatest impact should have moved down the ranking. Finally, plan in further work in this area for a second year, as part of a three-year rolling programme, and make the process a permanent addition to your School Development Plan.

NEXT STEPS

The process of tackling burnout is challenging and requires time - at least three terms for the rollout of your initial action plan. It also requires openness, transparency and a willingness on the part of SLT to accept criticism and acknowledge the need for change if staff burnout is to be prevented.

In turn, teachers must recognise that stress affects everyone - including the headteacher and all non-teaching support staff - and resist apportioning blame for the common good.

Above all, it will entail a major shift in culture, from one where staff may have fought lonely battles against Burnout, to one where every adult in the school gets to benefit from mutual support. If you can achieve that, you'll not only banish burnout, but also create a truly forward-thinking school - one that teachers will look forward to arriving at each day.

POSSIBLE BURNOUT CAUSES

- Marking requirements
- Ineffective pupil behaviour policies
- Inconsistent leadership
- Failure to take teachers' views into account
- Lack of thanks or acknowledgement
- Division and competition between different year groups and/or departments
- Poor internal communication
- Feedback characterised by aggression and lack of respect



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