

## How my school takes the stress off teachers

**My school has found ways to reduce the workload burden on teachers – while also helping us become more effective in the classroom**

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Teachers are encouraged to let their passion for a subject drive the lesson, rather than preparing a series of bite-sized activities.

We all know that stress is a problem in teaching, with workloads and other pressures [affecting the health of many across the UK](#). But I've experienced a variety of different approaches to teaching during my career, and I've seen that working long hours doesn't necessarily equal better performance in the classroom.

At my current school, Torquay Academy, I've noticed that staff are far more positive about the impact they're having on their students than those in previous schools. While it's difficult to measure staff wellbeing in a statistical sense, staff absence levels are at a record low, which suggests that stress levels are manageable. Our [recent Ofsted inspection](#) [pdf] noted that staff take pride in being part of the school and "overwhelmingly" support the principal's leadership. Meanwhile, our results have improved for the third year running.

### **Demanding workload driving young teachers out of profession**

So what is it exactly that allows us to feel supported and effective? What could other schools be doing?

### **A common approach to lessons gives teachers control**

Our teachers are allowed to talk, and our students are expected to listen. Influenced by Doug Lemov's [Teach Like a Champion strategies](#), there is a strong focus on teachers embedding structured routines into their lessons so students are clear about what is expected of them. Teachers are almost universally [given their subject specialism to teach](#). Within the structure of the lesson, teachers are encouraged to allow their passion for the subject to drive the narrative of the lesson, instead of spending hours planning bite-sized activities.

There is a strong correlation between the introduction of these methods in 2014 and the improved results. As teachers have gained increased confidence in their use, results have increased year-on-year, with significantly more students leaving school with five A\*-C in 2017 (75%) than in 2014 (28%). Of course, there have been other factors, but placing what happens within the classroom at the centre of all we do has certainly been the most significant.

We have an efficient whole-school behaviour policy

We believe the most effective behaviour management tool in any teacher's repertoire is praise. Success by students at our school is celebrated at every possible opportunity, and those who get it right are noticed and acknowledged.

When a student's behaviour impacts on others, the issue is dealt with swiftly. Crucially, it's not down to individual teachers to set or follow up detentions; this is managed centrally by an assistant principal dedicated to behaviour. Teachers simply need to speak to the child after school and make a phone call home to inform parents.

While teachers must acknowledge all written work students complete in class, detailed attention is only given to one extended piece at reasonable intervals. So in English, a child can expect feedback on one piece of work approximately every three weeks.

The feedback tells them how well they've fulfilled elements of the success criteria and identifies areas for improvement. The written element for the teacher is small – what is more important is that the marking is used to inform the planning of the subsequent lesson, where students will act on the advice. A teacher may photograph model paragraphs or misconceptions and share these to illustrate this more detailed whole-class feedback.

## **The homework process is streamlined**

### **How to be a minimalist teacher**

Individual teachers don't set homework. Instead, the homework tasks for the year are decided before that year begins, with resources centrally produced and distributed to students.

In year 7 and 8 this takes the form of a [knowledge organiser](#); students revise from this as per their homework timetables and evidence of this revision is checked each morning by tutors. In years 9 to 11, students are also asked to complete a written response to an exam-style question according to their timetable each evening. The only involvement staff have regarding homework is to collect and mark the exam responses as a class.

## **We collaborate on the curriculum**

I've seen teachers in previous schools spend hours planning exactly the same lesson, and it appears to be the norm for many teachers following [@team\\_english1](#) on Twitter – a community who generously share their own planning with one another online.

Our approach is collaborative. In the English department [we designed our curriculum as a team](#), and our common approach to teaching means it is easy to divide the units between us. Teachers are then free to dedicate their time solely to the creation of quality resources for their unit of work, benefiting from what others produce for everything else.

## **There aren't any burdensome written reports**

When parents receive reports, they want to be reassured that their child is behaving, working hard, doing their homework and making progress. Each of these can be communicated by a simple number, which makes up the main focus of our reports. Teachers only elaborate where a child is falling behind, so that parents know why and, more importantly, what they can do about it.

We feel that detailed conversations are far more effective when they take place face-to-face at parents' evenings. Teachers are expected to telephone parents if they are concerned about a child's progress as soon as it becomes an issue, and we also have progress leaders and their invaluable assistants, who don't have teaching timetables so can meet with parents as needed.

## **Ongoing coaching helps us improve quality**

We are one of four schools used as an example in a recent [Ambition School Leadership report](#) due to our approach to teacher improvement. Rather than being tied to the performance management process with a 1-4 grade for a high-pressure, one-off lesson once a term, teachers are expected to engage with an ongoing coaching process and dedicate themselves to self-improvement.

There is an emphasis on practising and improving small elements of what we do within the classroom, so a coach (either a lead practitioner or senior leader) will visit a lesson for 20 minutes each week and conduct a follow-up conversation. This removes the need for teachers to spend hours preparing paperwork and "outstanding" resources for a showpiece lesson that barely resembles what they are usually able to pull off, and ultimately negatively impacts the other lessons they're teaching that week.