

Teachers and workplace stress

Continuing the series on health and safety issues for teachers, BRIGID FITZGERALD looks at workplace stress.



An ASTI health and safety survey carried out in 2004 identified stress/anxiety as the most common cause of occupational illness in schools. This was consistent with the 2000 survey findings and similar to recent Health and Safety Authority (HSA) figures. Not every teacher suffers debilitating stress, but teaching is a particularly stressful occupation, a fact that has been recognised internationally in the literature and by the courts. Recently, there has been a growing awareness of the implications of occupational stress and the HSA has developed tools for the measurement of workplace stress and has increased its attention on stress as a workplace health hazard. Employers are also showing greater interest in the area and are more aware that it should be dealt with in the context of good general health and safety practice.

What causes occupational stress?

Occupational stress is brought about by a combination of personal, organisational and social factors including role, leadership and relationships. Teaching has a number of specific stressors such as dealing with disruptive student behaviour, the pressures of school inspections, providing cover for colleagues, and large workload. Although the school day may appear to be shorter than most office jobs,

this is largely class contact time and teachers put in many more hours, preparing classes, marking assignments and organising extracurricular activities. Teachers have little time between lessons to prepare, plan or recover. According to Richard Wynne of the Education Research Centre, the isolated nature of the job can lead to poor communication and this, together with inconsistency of policy – particularly regarding discipline – and a lack of resources, are major causes of teacher stress. Changes to the curricula and the introduction of new educational programmes can lead to increasing demands. Any major change in the way a job is performed carries the potential to cause stress and teaching work cannot be put off due to circumstances or overload. Development and change is often necessary and welcome but it needs to be in conjunction with the necessary training and support. Teachers have the added responsibility of ensuring that their students work to the best of their potential. According to Moira Leydon, Assistant General Secretary: Education and Research: "A teacher's work has a lot to do with communication and relationships, and although this is a positive feature, the more emotion invested, the more stress potential, especially when negative outcomes occur". Teaching is a particularly intensive activity; in fact, it involves constant pressing demands and interaction with adolescents at different stages of development.

Students who show a lack of interest and low motivation can negatively affect a teacher's own motivation and professional confidence. Additionally, student behaviour and indiscipline in schools can compound an already stressful situation, particularly in instances of bullying or harassment. In relation to student relationships and behaviour, teachers often take on additional roles, many of which they receive no extra training for.

Effects

The immediate effects of stress are anxiety and depression, and prolonged occupational stress can lead to mental and physical ill health. Last year's ASTI stress survey showed that outcomes of stress on individual teachers include feeling tired and lacking in energy, feeling de-motivated, feeling under strain and losing confidence as a teacher. At school level, effects include colleagues feeling under pressure, feeling de-motivated, low morale and colleagues taking time off. A stressful work environment does not just affect teachers and management; stress and burnout can significantly impair the quality of teachers' relationships with students and the quality of their teaching.

The need for action

Some 11% of all retiring teachers retire on grounds of ill health, with 50% of disability retirements attributed to stress/depression/anxiety. Pat King, ASTI Assistant General Secretary: Industrial Relations says: "Early retirement, as well as the growing evidence of litigation concerning occupational stress, should be of concern to school managements and the Department of Education and Science (DES), and it is incumbent on employers to undertake stress prevention activities within the workplace. Not only will this provide the only effective defence in a situation where litigation arises but it will also curtail the loss of experienced teachers". Legally, management has a duty to minimise the risk of stress and to deal with its occurrence, and the school's safety statement must identify stress as a hazard and set out details of how it will be reduced and how teachers will be trained to deal with it.

Prevention and management

Occupational stress can be managed through a mixture of primary, secondary and tertiary intervention. The first step involves prevention, usually in conjunction with organisation-wide change. Secondary intervention involves stress management and includes aspects such as training for the job, and in aspects of health and safety generally. Tertiary intervention focuses on minimisation of effects and involves the provision of counselling and assistance.

What can I do?

Stress is an ongoing problem, not an individual weakness. If you are suffering from work-related stress, your employer has a legal duty to tackle it. There is no stigma attached to asking for help.

- If specific aspects of your job are causing you stress, you can talk to your principal, a colleague or the school steward.
- The Employee Assistance Service (EAS) is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You can call 1800-411057 or email eas@vhi.ie.
- Look out for stress prevention or stress management courses. The ASTI runs an in-service professional development programme. Notices of courses appear in ASTIR and Nuacht, and information is available on the ASTI website.

According to Pat King: "Good practice in stress prevention focuses on employers and employees working together to identify and tackle key causes of stress. Employees should have a level of control over their work and support from management. Conflict should be minimised and a teacher's role should be clearly defined. Consistent and fair management actions are also important. Workload demands should be achievable and work patterns and environments suitable". A survey on stress carried out by the ASTI last year showed that 74% of the respondents prioritised small classes to reduce stress. The ASTI is currently engaged in a campaign for a change in the teacher appointment ratio and a consequent reduction in class size. Commonly, the only training on stress coping mechanisms teachers receive is during their teacher training. The ASTI would like to see the introduction of a DES-funded stress prevention in-service programme, with courses including recognising the symptoms of stress, reducing the risk of ill health and practical ways of reducing stress. According to Pat King: "It is important that teachers have support from each other as well as from management, and they should be vigilant about the emergence of stress symptoms in colleagues and ensure that schools have efficient systems to prevent bullying and harassment".

Pilot programme

The Work Research Centre, in conjunction with the teachers' unions, ran a pilot stress prevention programme in 1999. The great achievement of this project was that it showed that the issue of stress could be addressed successfully through analysis and training. It was recommended that the pilot programme be extended into a nationwide programme and appropriately resourced to enable it to continue its work for the future. As yet there are no plans to launch a national stress prevention programme. Richard Wynne believes: "There is no coherent approach as to how stress should be dealt with by the DES or school managements. There is a real lack of direction from the top".

Strategies for the future

The DES, in consultation with the teachers' unions and management groups, is putting in place an occupational health strategy as a support resource for teachers. An occupational health management service is due to begin operation in early 2008 and will incorporate pre-employment health assessments, sickness absence management, medical assessments of fitness for work, and ill health retirement. As part of the health strategy, the Employee Assistance Service for teachers has been put in place. The service incorporates confidential counselling on issues such as health, relationships, bereavement and stress. Teaching alone in front of adolescents can be a lot of pressure and an important part of stress prevention and coping with stress is talking to somebody.

Moira Leydon believes: "The ultimate aim of the health management system should be to maintain the health and welfare of staff. A fundamental aspect of that, stress and burnout, is not being specifically addressed." According to the DES, stress prevention and management are matters that will come within the scope of the occupational health strategy as it develops, but currently there are no clear proposals in place. Notably, stress rehabilitation and recovery is not a priority, as the emphasis of the system is on prevention rather than cure.

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