



TEACHER WELFARE: RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

What you need to know

Why is teacher well-being important?

Being healthy physically and emotionally, being socially active and being able to take care of themselves and of others helps teachers to become and remain happy and confident, positive and engaged in their own learning and teaching.

It must now be recognised that teachers' overall well-being must be fostered, developed and supported alongside their professional and intellectual development.

Why is staff welfare important?

There is a growing awareness of the importance of workplace health and safety, and schools have become used to regular audits to minimise/ eliminate threats to physical safety in their environment. The same attention has not been paid to staff welfare and the prevention of those psycho-social hazards which can strongly impact teachers and the wholeschool organisation.

What is a psycho-social hazard?

A hazard is anything which can cause harm to people, property or the environment. A psycho-social hazard is one of a number of factors which can lead to stress and diminish emotional and physical well-being if they go unchecked. These hazards threaten mental health in the same way that physical hazards threaten the physical safety and health of employees.

Are teachers at risk of psycho-social hazards?

Teachers are particularly at risk here. The reasons for this can include:

- the growing workload on teachers as a result of cuts in staffing and the increasing burden of administrative tasks in teaching
- the high emotional demands placed on teachers by dealing with the varied needs of students, parents and guardians
- the increased bureaucratisation of teaching, for example, formatting of subject plans and the numeracy/literacy initiative
- the high levels of job insecurity and unequal pay suffered by newly-qualified and non-permanent teachers
- the deterioration in teachers' terms and conditions of service

- poor management/staff communication and relationships
- the lack of professional mobility, which demotivates teachers and impacts on staff morale.

What impact does failure to manage welfare have on our schools?

A healthy work environment is more flexible and capable of delivering better outcomes for all. Poor management of staff welfare can have an enormous impact, not only on the lives and careers of individual teachers but also on the school as a whole.

These impacts include:

- absenteeism, resulting in an increased workload for all
- low staff morale
- poor productivity and impoverished outcomes.

What are the employer's duties with regard to staff welfare?

According to Article 8.1 of the 2005 Safety, Health and Welfare Act, employers have a legal duty to their staff to "ensure, so far as it is reasonably practicable, the safety, health and **welfare** [emphasis added by ASTI] at work of his or her employees". This means that the employer must exercise all due care in the discharge of their duties by identifying foreseeable hazards, assessing the associated risks and putting in place the necessary protective measures. Reasonable practice may be understood to mean that which a reasonable person would do given the particular set of circumstances (Article 2.6, Safety, Health and Welfare Act, 2005).

The Act further specifies that the employer's duties include the production of a safety statement. This statement should incorporate:

- identifying psycho-social hazards
- assessing psycho-social risks for activities in school and off campus
- outlining protective and preventative measures and the resources required
- implementing measures in keeping with the general principles of prevention outlined in the Act
- ensuring there is a workplace emergency plan/critical incident policy
- ensuring the safety statement is reviewed at least annually
- ensuring the safety statement is easily accessible.

What is a safety statement?

A safety statement is a legal document issued by an employer that serves as a comprehensive safety report. It comprises the hazard-related information collected and analysed during an evaluation period and recommends actions, precautions and procedures for minimising the known hazards. Some hazards pose a psycho-social threat to mental health in the same way as physical hazards can threaten the physical safety of employees. Section 20 of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 requires the safety statement to include:

- a risk assessment of the hazards that may affect the employees or visitors
- a recording of the significant findings of any risk assessments.

The safety statement should be reviewed and amended as appropriate on a routine basis. It should be revised immediately following changes in circumstances in the operation of the school or after a dangerous occurrence. It is a requirement that the safety statement be brought to the attention of all employees and to any

other persons at the place of work who might be exposed to the specific risks outlined in the statement.

What controls can limit the risk of psycho-social hazards?

- Identifying stressors and establishing their root cause.
- Addressing serious concerns about health, safety and welfare in a school.
- Ensuring that the demands on the employee body are achievable and within the role of the job holders.
- Ensuring that there is employee input into decision-making and career progression.
- Ensuring that systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.
- Ensuring that the school provides employees with information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes.
- Ensuring that board of management/ETB decisions are consistent and fair.
- If necessary, providing employees with training to support any changes in their jobs.
- Ensuring that employees can approach the principal/deputy principal to access appropriate support.
- Ensuring that the school has the following policies, and that they are widely disseminated and regularly reviewed:
 - dignity in the workplace
 - anti-bullying
 - code of behaviour
 - critical incident
 - substance use
 - special educational needs.

This list is not exhaustive.



What can teachers do to promote staff welfare?

Other than the legal responsibilities of an employee described in the Safety, Health and Welfare Act, teachers can:

- foster an atmosphere where staff welfare is promoted and stressors can be discussed
- help identify psycho-social hazards where they occur
- draw the employer's attention to breaches of good practice
- familiarise themselves with the safety statement and the annual audit procedures
- ensure their board of management representatives are familiar with the safety statement and all other policies which impact on staff welfare.

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