

# PUTTING WELL-BEING AT THE HEART OF SCHOOLS

**Teacher stress is recognised as a serious health and safety concern, but what can be done to combat it? ASTIR talks to occupational psychologist Richard Wynne.**

Teachers don't need to be told that stress is a serious issue, and both local and international bodies are also realising that it needs to be tackled. The Work Research Centre (WRC) specialises in research and consultancy on key social issues. Dr Richard Wynne of the WRC is an occupational psychologist who specialises in the area of work and health. He has long worked in the area of teacher stress, and says that there are a number of factors involved, from how work is organised, to the nature of the work itself: "Schools are not as effective as they could be. Teachers feel they have no voice in how schools are run, while principals are under huge stress".

The impact of the moratorium on posts, and of the removal of protected guidance counselling hours, is well known, and is a key example of how policies and structures at system level can contribute to stress. Another is the culture of temporary and part-time contracts that massively impacts on younger teachers. The day-to-day stresses of the job come from the challenges of larger, and more diverse, class groups, increasingly demanding parents, and the need to keep up with professional development: "These will all potentially add to stress, but particularly if teachers are not trained".

So what can be done? For Richard, it's not rocket science: "If you want to reduce stress and improve the well-being of teachers, you have to put resources in".

## Integrated Workplace Health Management

Richard is involved, along with Deirdre MacDonald, chairperson of the ASTI Safety, Health and Welfare Committee, in engaging with the stakeholders in education – unions, management bodies, the Department of Education and Skills (DES), etc., – to develop a system for workplace well-being. The Integrated Workplace Health Management (IWHM)

initiative has three pillars: "The first is around standard health and safety issues that every school should be addressing, everything from slips, trips and falls, to stress in the workplace".

The second pillar is around health promotion, and strategies to maintain and improve physical and mental health. The third deals with the issues around returning to work after a period of physical, or mental, ill health: "If someone is off work for illness reasons, we need to get them back in the most constructive and effective way possible. Most absenteeism is due to longer-term, particularly mental health, issues. The DES has the Occupational Medical Service but there is very limited intervention about how you might alter the workplace to facilitate return to work, for example deciding that this person could be assigned a reduced number of classes for a period".

Of course, the path to implementation of any initiative can be painfully and frustratingly slow, and IWHM is no different. The Committee, chaired by Deirdre MacDonald, continues to work with stakeholders to push for progress, and there has been some movement: "I've met with representatives from Healthy Ireland [a Government-led national framework for action to improve health and well-being] and they are very interested. We've also recently been talking to the Teaching Council, which is looking quite favourably towards part funding the project".

The Health and Safety Authority has also been very supportive, but the DES has so far been "neutral" on the issue: "Support has not been forthcoming in any meaningful way, which I think is holding us back".

Co-funders are needed for broader support, and the IWHM is seeking to fund a pilot: "We propose to do a pilot project at a scale big enough to show benefits. I think it will generate huge interest and huge benefits. These approaches work elsewhere and should work here".



## Leadership style vital

There's no doubt that school leadership structures have a role – both positive and negative – in the 'stress culture' of a school. Richard says that proactive leadership is essential, but support structures are needed: "Leadership development is important. Principals or assistant principals receive next to no training for the role. Training in leadership skills would be a huge leap forward. We did some work with principals while working on the IWHM – they are under extraordinary pressure and not appropriately trained or supported, and this feeds down to increase the stress on the rank and file teacher".

For Richard, participatory leadership is the way forward: "We need to give people a say in decisions that will affect them and that they can help implement. Staff meetings are often there to announce things rather than to invite input in decision-making and implementation. Why isn't there a health and safety subcommittee in each school? Why isn't there one for staff training? Part of what we're proposing in the IWHM is to set up a small team in the school to manage this process. Posts of responsibility and protected time to do what needs to be done beyond teaching duties have to be restored for schools to work".