

The coping class

DEIRDRE MacDONALD asks: what are you coping with today, and how are you coping?



With ever-increasing demands on your professional life, 45 extra hours (33 Croke Park plus out of hours staff/parent-teacher meetings) and up to 22% less take home pay, around the country the staffroom is indeed the coping class room. In 2004 the largest and most comprehensive occupational health research carried out by four British universities found classroom teacher to be the most stressful occupation.* Irish research conducted by the Work Research Centre over 20 years ago showed that 35% of all teachers were experiencing stress.**

The ASTI, by prioritising teacher welfare, is acting in a progressive and proactive manner to support teachers' well-being and mental health.

Changing times

The past 20 years, without doubt, have seen enormous changes in society, ranging from changes in family structure to the detrimental effects of personal and corporate greed and, most recently, mass unemployment. Schools and teachers have done their best to absorb and contend with these enormous changes, often to the detriment of the individual teacher's well-being. We are fast approaching saturation point, where more and more professional demands rather than increasing standards and productivity (Troikaesque language) will bring about breaking point. Teachers' ability to cope with the myriad of demands is declining, morale is seriously damaged and the constant media onslaught is exacerbating the situation. Teachers' health and welfare will undergo further degeneration unless something is done to protect and promote it.

The role of employers

Teachers have rights too. Schools are unique workplaces with a complex and divergent set of challenges and difficulties. Boards of management have statutory obligations under both employment equality and safety, health and welfare legislation, to face up to the issue of the mental health of their employees. This is a right, not an optional extra. There is obviously a significant lack of consideration of this area of school life, and a lack of compliance with the Safety, Health and Welfare Act 2005. Mental illness/stress was the most common reason for teachers' ill health retirement in 2013, according to the most recent figures from Medmark, the occupational healthcare service for teachers. Among teachers, mental illness/stress accounted for 35% of ill health retirements, compared to the next most common reason, cancer, which accounted for 20% of ill health retirement in 2013. Mental illness/stress also accounts for a large amount of teachers' long-term sick leave. In 2013, 34% of occupational health assessments for teachers were for mental illness/stress, compared to 8% for cancer. Employers have an obligation and a duty of care to put in place systems of work that protect employees from hazards that could lead to mental or physical ill health. A mere statement of intent is not sufficient to fulfill management's statutory obligation. An employer is expected to implement a process of continuous risk assessment and to implement control measures in order to eliminate or reduce workplace hazards.

'Guidelines on Managing Safety and Health – in Post-Primary Schools', a manual produced by the Health and Safety Authority, State Claims Agency, Department of Education and Skills, and School Development Planning Initiative omits the word welfare in its title. This manual aims to assist schools to conform to the Safety, Health and Welfare Act 2005, which sets out the requirements for securing and improving the safety, health and welfare of people at work.

Extending policies and programmes to the staffroom

Under the "Principles of Prevention", outlined under Schedule 3 of the Safety, Health and Welfare Act 2005, there is acknowledgement of the impact of "working conditions, social factors and the influence of factors relating to the working environment" on safety, health and welfare in schools. This 236-page manual does refer to bullying and psychosocial hazards, but only in its glossary. The auditing tool section includes one page on bullying and one page on psychosocial hazards, compared to three pages on slips, trips and falls.

Currently anti-bullying policies and strategies in schools have the student body as their target group. What about bullying of teachers by pupils, parents, other staff members or school management? The problem of bullying in the workplace requires a distinct set of protocols and preventive measures to be developed, implemented and evaluated. According to a 2001 ESRI study, approximately 50% of workplaces have a policy on workplace bullying. How many schools have such a policy today? How many schools have a mental health policy for employees?

'A Vision for Change' – a document produced by the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy, which sets out a policy framework for mental health – identifies the population perspective model of mental health promotion as a viable and productive template, because it can put in place programmes and interventions tailored to specific groups and settings. The school as a workplace is one such setting. This model of health promotion is important because it also includes those who may already have developed mental health problems, as well as the healthy population. It is seen internationally as a capacity building measure in that it empowers individuals, groups and organisations to fulfill their potential.

Prevention is better than a cure. However, at times a cure is required. Stress management is about how the individual copes with stress – it is a secondary intervention. The Employee Assistance Service is an example of such a facility. It is there to help teachers find coping strategies during times of stress. While this is vital, the service does not deal with the institutional aspect of preventing or reducing stress through organisational change. What is needed is a project that guides schools through the process of identifying institutional systems and work practices that cause teachers stress and have allowed the problem to fester. 'Creating A Healthy Teaching Environment – Teacher Stress Prevention', a pilot project in 2000-2001 in which the ASTI participated, provided such a model and was accredited with the quality assurance mark by the European Network of Health Promotion in the Workplace. In other words, the project was recognised as a model of best practice.

Standing up for teachers' rights

It is time for teachers to start practising what they continually preach to students. Stand up for yourself and your rights. Examination of a random selection of school mission statements will show a proliferation of such words as nurturing, safe, secure, just, respectful environment, caring

community, fulfilling potential. What a pity so few actively pursue these statements with respect to staff welfare and well-being. Words are cheap. In fact in this case they cost nothing. Enough of the rhetoric! The time has come to ensure school management boards, the Department of Education and Skills and individual school boards of management live up to their words and comply fully with workplace legislation. The ASTI, by prioritising teacher welfare in line with the recommendations of the European Trade Union Committee for Education, is acting in a progressive and proactive manner to support practising teachers of all ages in a practical way to maintain their well-being and mental health.


So, what are YOU coping with today? How are YOU coping?

*Millet, C.T., Johnson, S.J., Cooper, C.L., Donald, I.J., Cartright, S., Taylor, P.J. Britain's most stressful occupations and the role of emotional labour. BPS Occupational Psychology Conference, Warwick, 2005.

**Work Research Centre. Stress Prevention in Teaching Pilot Project. Dublin, 2002.

Deirdre MacDonald


Deirdre is the Chairperson of the ASTI Safety, Health and Welfare Committee.



Berlin Study Visit

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For Teachers



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