Teachers under pressure to make the grade

Schoolteachers are still fighting an uphill battle with large quantities of paperwork and competing demands on their time, despite Government efforts to reduce pressure on their working lives, a new report will reveal on Friday (21 March).

According to the Cambridge University-led study, teachers’ working weeks have, if anything, increased in the wake of a series of “remodelling” initiatives by schools ministers designed to liberate them from onerous workloads.

The report, which will be presented to the National Union of Teachers annual conference in Manchester, says that “Demands on teachers have increased beyond their capacity to meet them”.

Headteachers and senior staff are, in particular bearing the brunt of increased managerial duties and policy initiatives. Researchers also found that growing numbers of Teaching Assistants, introduced to take some of the administrative weight off teachers’ shoulders, are often running classes while teachers themselves deal with tasks such as paperwork and photocopying.

“The workforce reforms of the last few years have proved a palliative for a system on the verge of implosion, but they have not improved teachers’ work-life balance,” Professors John MacBeath and Maurice Galton, from the University of Cambridge’s Faculty of Education, who led the research, said.

“That applies to headteachers and senior staff in particular, but we also found that teaching assistants were increasingly put upon, while in many cases the lives of normal school staff had not improved. For heads, 12-hour days are not uncommon, weekends usually involve school-related work and extended holidays are a distant memory.”

The report, entitled *Pressure and Professionalism*, was commissioned by the NUT and follows a number of previous surveys, in 2002, 2004 and 2006 which similarly sought to present an accurate portrait of teachers’ working lives.

Since then, there have been a number of Government “remodelling” initiatives designed to liberate teachers from heavy workloads. To analyse how effective these had been, the researchers returned to the schools they had visited in their previous surveys and interviewed teachers, parents and pupils.

Contrary to official figures, they found that working hours have remained the same over the past five years, and in some cases even increased. A primary school teacher’s typical working week, for example, was now found to be 56 hours compared with 54 hours in 2002.
In secondary schools the pattern was much the same. Asked about the impact of the reforms, one English teacher replied: “I work every minute of the day. I work through break, all through lunch… I take work home most nights, these days I work at weekends as well. I do my preparation in the holidays”.

In some cases, the researchers found that teachers were under so much pressure they were unable to arrange a return visit because the school’s head was “completely bogged down”. “Letters and Emails often received no response and trial by telephone was a deeply frustrating experience,” the report observes. “Schools, along with businesses, had entered the age of the disembodied call centre.”

Compared with 2002, discipline problems were found to have become worse in primary schools, adding to the teachers’ workload. Some complained about a minority of “highly permissive parents” who made it harder to enforce discipline and rules in the classroom. One teacher even recounted an incident in which a six-year-old had told them how to kill pimps and prostitutes after mastering the violent computer game, Grand Theft Auto.

Teaching Assistants, while welcomed by regular teachers because of the extra help they provide, were in many cases found to be focusing so much on children with special needs that they were barely lifting the pressure on the classroom teacher at all. In other situations, teachers were found to be relying on them to lead the class while they carried out administrative duties. Teaching assistants are commended for their goodwill and ‘going the extra mile’ in face of inadequate pay and training for the demanding range of tasks they undertake.

Gradually, researchers say, many teachers are becoming more like “learning managers”, leading to an artificial divide between pastoral care and academic achievement. This view appears to be compounded by the experiences of students – one secondary pupil, for instance, when asked “What’s the best thing you’ve done in this school?” was unable to think of an answer.

Despite the long working hours and high-pressure environment, however, the researchers did also find cases of happy teachers enjoying successful working lives. In many instances, the report says, this was because of excellent management from headteachers, who allowed their staff to work creatively.

“Good teachers have always known how to be educationally subversive,” the report adds. “They are encouraged, supported and empowered by a senior leadership team which understands that schools learn and change from the bottom up.”

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Professors John MacBeath and Maurive Galton are available for interviews. Copies of the full report can be provided on request.