

# Teaching and classroom assistants key to keeping schools open in lockdown

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Just over half of teaching assistants in schools stepped-up to manage classes on their own during the winter lockdown ensuring vulnerable and key worker children could attend lessons, according to a new study by

UCL researchers.

The study, published today by the UCL Institute of Education and funded by UNISON, analyzed data from 9055 teaching and classroom assistants. It gives a broad picture of how TAs contributed to the running of UK schools, what this meant for them and makes key recommendations for the future.

The researchers found that 88% of TAs supported vulnerable and key worker [children](#) in school and 51% managed a whole class or bubble on their own, while class teachers prepared and delivered remote learning to children from home.

Dr. Rob Webster (UCL Centre for Inclusive Education) said: "TAs have been absolutely key in allowing schools to keep functioning during the pandemic.

"Our report highlights that in many ways teaching assistants have been the 'unsung heroes' of the pandemic and it is hard to see how schools could have managed without them. Some respondents described themselves as working 'on the frontline' and shouldering much of the responsibility for keeping schools open."

Professor Gemma Moss (UCL Institute of Education) added: "Our research found that the work required to keep schools functioning intensified in England in particular as schools entered the Winter 2021 lockdown with a legal requirement to supply remote education to all those children learning at home.

"At the same time the Government extended the list of parents who could classify as critical or key workers resulting in considerably higher numbers of children in school compared to previous lockdowns.

This increased workload for teachers and TAs who had to find ways of managing children in school and providing lesson content for those at home. Our findings suggest this may have led to increased anxiety as TAs juggled many different tasks."

While managing larger groups in school, the survey also shows TAs played an important role in enabling children to carry on learning at home including continuing to provide differentiated support when they could. Almost half reported that home learning had worked well for at least some of the pupils they support.

Despite the contribution TAs have made during the pandemic, only a quarter (27%) considered that their own school had become more aware of their role in supporting pupils and families, as part of the day to day running of schools.

The report highlights that nearly one in four TAs took on new responsibilities without any training although 20% said they had training to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing, and 44% saying they had picked up new digital skills during the pandemic.

Dr. Webster concluded: "The COVID crisis has underlined the value of the contribution TAs make to their schools. Their insights and knowledge should be drawn on in the effort to rebuild education.

"Our research reveals just how essential TAs are to the day-to-day running of schools. This is true in more normal times as well as during a pandemic. And if we are to build a more resilient education system going forward, then their voices need to be heard."

UNISON head of education Jon Richards said: "Teaching and classroom assistants were crucial to the smooth running of schools before the pandemic. Schools have relied upon them even more so this past year.

This research proves that. But for too long they've been taken for granted.

"Support staff have an important role to play in the drive to get all children to where they need to be, both emotionally and academically. They also provide essential support to children with special and additional needs.

"However, staffing ratios have been increasing and many higher-level posts cut. This has piled the pressure on, and increased the workload of, poorly paid lower grade employees, who are frequently asked to cover work they're not trained to do.

"Teaching and classroom assistants have a vital role in helping pupils catch up on their lost learning post-pandemic. But to do this they need proper training and a decent wage."

The report authors make three key recommendations. Firstly, that as schools fully reopen, it is important to ensure staff wellbeing is considered equally alongside pupil wellbeing.

Secondly, the Government needs to recognize and invest in TAs as part of their recovery planning. The report comments that TAs' local knowledge of their school communities and the difficulties they have faced during COVID mean they are best placed to help schools and pupils catch-up. This is likely to be more cost-effective compared to the English government's preference for generic solutions and external providers who are less able to recognize the local dimensions to pupils' needs.

Finally, all staff, whatever their role, need to be part of build-back planning. The report found that many TAs said they felt 'peripheral' to the school community. TAs must be recognized fully for the important

part they play in the fabric of the [school](#).

**More information:** [Unsung Heroes: The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown.](#) [maximisingtas.co.uk/assets/unsung-heroesfinal.pdf](https://maximisingtas.co.uk/assets/unsung-heroesfinal.pdf)

Provided by University College London

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