

The pressures on mental health and well-being faced by teachers in the UK

March 29 2023, by Shaun Thompson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

According to the 2022 [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#)—a survey carried out by the charity Education Support—78% of UK school staff reportedly experienced mental health symptoms [due to their work](#) in the past academic year. The same survey found that 59% of staff had considered leaving the profession.

This is an ongoing trend. A 2019 survey of over 5,500 UK teachers by the teaching union NASUWT found that 70% felt that the job had negatively impacted their mental health within the previous 12 months. Of those surveyed, 32% had accessed some [form of counseling](#).

These issues are not limited to those who have been in the profession for some time. According [to a study](#) published in 2023 by research organization the [National Foundation for Educational Research](#), between 10% and 12% of early career teachers—those within the first five years of qualifying—left the profession between 2015-2020.

My [own research](#) has focused on trainee teachers. I have found that stressors such as creating and maintaining professional relationships, the intensity of their workload and their awareness of the pressures on themselves as teachers and students all affected [trainee teachers'](#) well-being.

These alarming findings raise questions about the sustainability and outlook for the profession. Both the Department for Education and Ofsted have a commitment to tackle these issues and have created an education [staff well-being charter](#).

Within the charter, the Department of Education make commitments including to "support the sector to drive down unnecessary workload", and to "improve access to mental health and well-being resources". While this charter clearly conveys awareness of the current issues within the profession, this may simply not be enough.

Teaching time

More than two-thirds of staff surveyed for the Teacher Well-being Index [referred to workload](#) as one of the main issues leading to them thinking of leaving their jobs. In 2018, [full-time](#) primary teachers were working

on average [more than 52 hours per week](#) a week.

Most teachers enter the profession in order to [work with and help children](#). But less than half of the 52-hour week worked by primary teachers in 2018 was actually spent directly [with children](#). While teaching of course requires some administrative duties, this balance of time may explain some of the frustrations teachers are feeling.

Teachers are also grappling with a lack of resources. The 2022 autumn budget allocated additional funding for schools, but this will not come into effect until the 2023-24 academic year. Teachers have been resorting to [using their own money](#) to provide, or supplement, resources for the children in their class.

This situation only exacerbates concerns over teachers' pay. According to two of the biggest [teaching unions](#) (NEU and NASUWT), teachers' pay fell by one-fifth in real terms [between 2010 and 2022](#). Coupled with unmanageable workloads, such real-term pay cuts only add to the low morale and increased frustrations within the profession. In England, teachers' [pay progression](#) may also be based on performance, which also adds pressure.

Target culture

Increasing numbers of targets for teachers to meet adds to stress. In the 2022 Teacher Well-being Index, 42% cited "[target-driven culture](#)" as a reason they were thinking of leaving.

Updating targets to support the development of educational practice that will provide the best opportunities and outcomes for our children is clearly worthwhile. But the sheer volume and frequency of new reforms and initiatives leaves teachers struggling to keep up.

Within the past ten years, teachers have seen reforms to [the curriculum](#), the way their [students are assessed](#), a [new induction framework](#) for newly qualified teachers and new guidance for [Ofsted inspections](#).

Teachers also [feel significant pressure](#) over Ofsted inspections. When [370 schools](#) previously given an "outstanding" rating were reinspected in 2021-22—following the changes to the inspection framework—only 17% kept their "outstanding" rating.

It is certainly necessary to make sure schools are providing children with a high-quality education. But after the death of [headteacher Ruth Perry](#), which her family called a "direct result" of the pressure from an Ofsted inspection, the way the inspection system works—including its [single-word rating](#) system—has been [called into question](#).

Of course, we all want the best outcomes for our children, both academically and socially. But we may need to reflect on how effectively the current system is allowing this. We are beginning to witness a breakdown in the profession.

Teachers are striking and unions are campaigning for better pay and conditions. Teachers are leaving the profession and most alarmingly, there is a clear impact on teachers' mental health. The current situation is unlikely to be having any positive impact on the children in our schools.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The pressures on mental health and well-being faced by teachers in the UK (2023, March 29) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-03-pressures-mental-health-well-being-teachers.html>

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