

Anxiety of head teachers across England 'substantially increased' during the pandemic

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Credit: Max Fischer from Pexels

The anxiety of head teachers across England increased "substantially" throughout the pandemic, finds the largest study of its type to date.

The results of the research, which examined thousands of teachers' anxiety about work at 75 touchpoints from October 2019 to July 2022, show that senior leaders in schools suffered—even "much more" when compared with junior colleagues.

The findings, [published](#) in *Educational Review*, are the latest to demonstrate the mental well-being and pressure being put on heads across the country.

A recent poll by the National Association of head teachers found more than a third of school leaders needed support for mental health or well-being in the past 12 months. While the issue has also been in keen focus since the death of primary school headteacher Ruth Perry, after a coroner ruled a critical Ofsted report contributed to her suicide.

"Our results illustrate how much of the burden when a school is facing a challenging period is carried by head teachers and senior leaders," explains co-author Professor Rebecca Allen, who co-founded the analytical software used to survey teachers for this research, "Teacher Tapp."

"The findings demonstrate how schools need policymakers to have a clear plan that can be stuck to when such difficult circumstances occur. The to-and-fro schools in England experienced during the pandemic was clearly very difficult for senior staff. Stronger, more decisive leadership from government and associated policymakers is needed in the future.

"Now, governments need to have a plan to ensure head teachers do not leave the profession; many have been through a prolonged period of strain, with their [anxiety levels](#) raised over a sustained period of time. It is likely that many now feel burnt out and are considering leaving the education sector for pastures new.

"To retain the best school leaders, the government must ensure they are not put under such extremely difficult circumstances in future, and that they are given the opportunity to properly recharge after the upheaval of the last few years. For schools, a key issue to emerge from the pandemic is their preparedness to utilize digital technology. Moving forward, a strong case can be made for digital technology to become a routine part of instructional practice."

The research team analyzed 26,394 observations provided by 1,530 teachers who answered daily questions on Teacher Tapp around their anxiety about work. Teachers from all types of schools—including primary, junior, secondary (state and independent)—and roles—"middle leaders," a senior leadership team member, to the head of the school—subscribed to complete the regular surveys.

Among results, it was found that head teachers were "generally quite good at protecting more junior colleagues from workplace stresses."

The anxiety of these leaders, however, took a "burden" and increased. This peaked at the very end of 2020 and start of 2021—when it was not clear whether schools would re-open or not—with the average anxiety score reaching 6.7 on the scale, when answering a 0–10 scale "not anxious at all" to "completely anxious" upon answering "how anxious do you feel about work today?" At this point more than 67% of participants had a score of 7 or more (a "high" level of anxiety).

Overall, results demonstrated [female teachers](#) experienced a greater impact than men did, particularly among those with young children. Differences were also observed in work-related anxiety between independent and state schoolteachers, though only during the first lockdown.

The anxiety levels changed over time. After an initial sharp peak just

before schools were first shutdown, teachers' work-related anxiety was (on average) slightly lower during the first wave of the pandemic than before.

"This may be related to the fact that teachers were working, on average, around 10 hours less than usual per week," explains the paper, "however, soon the work-related anxiety of teachers then rose above pre-COVID levels throughout the 2020/21 [academic year](#), with head teachers and female teachers—most notably those with young children—among the most affected."

The paper also pinpoints evidence that the work-related anxiety of teachers during the first wave of the pandemic was worse for those who worked on-site (rather than at home).

Concluding, Professor Allen states, "Disruption continued on-and-off for more than two years, with educators having to deal with a combination of exam cancellations, COVID testing, COVID 'bubbles,' ever-changing government policy and dealing with pupils' learning loss. Such challenges are likely to have impacted some teachers' mental health, including their well-being at work. These findings have helped to push forward our understanding of teacher and school leader well-being, particularly during a time of crisis."

Limitations of the paper include the sample being those who self-selected to partake, rather than a random draw from the teacher population. Additionally, not all teachers responded to the work-related anxiety question at each time point (approximately 80% did each time).

More information: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the anxiety of teachers at work?, *Educational Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2023.2293455](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2293455). www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2023.2293455

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