

UK government report lays bare educators' unsustainable working conditions

Tom Pearce
8 May 2023

A new Department for Education (DfE) report paints a bleak picture of conditions across the school sector. “Working lives of teachers and leaders, wave 1,” was published during the easter break.

The report, based on a survey by IFF Research and the Institute of Education (IoE) in the spring of 2022, includes the opinions of thousands of educators in state schools across England who were surveyed on “pupil behaviour, pay and reward, flexible working, workload, wellbeing, professional development and career plans.”

Despite having been available to ministers since at least last September, its publication was deliberately delayed by the DfE to ensure that the findings were not included in their submission of evidence to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) as it considered a pay award for 2023/24. The STRB has suggested a 3.5 percent rise for teachers for 2023-24, despite the Retail Prices Index showing 13.5 percent inflation in the year to March.

This is what the government didn't want the review body to consider:

- A teacher's average working week has dropped by only 48 minutes since 2019, to 48.7 hours. This despite a 2019 government pledge to “drive down unnecessary workload pressures”.

- Two-thirds of teachers (66 percent) reported that they spent over half of their working time on tasks other than teaching, rising to 77 percent of secondary teachers.

- More than half (56 percent) of the educators surveyed thought their workload was unacceptable and that they did not have sufficient control over it.

- A vast majority of educators (76 percent) were not satisfied with national changes to teacher pay in the 2021-22 year, when pay was frozen for most staff.

- Despite the government and the media parroting

claims that teachers have already had a pay rise for the 2022-23 year, the survey found that 44 percent did not receive a pay increase in that period. Most of those affected said the explanation was that they had already reached the top of their scale (58 percent), but a significant 34 percent blamed the pay freeze and 12 percent cited budget pressures.

- A majority of teachers and leaders (61 percent) were dissatisfied with the salary they received for the work they did.

- 86 percent said they experienced stress in their work and around two-thirds (62 percent) said their job did not give them sufficient time for their personal life.

- More than half (52 percent) said it negatively impacted their mental health.

Regarding the retention of teachers, the report states, “A quarter of educators ... were considering leaving the state school sector in the next 12 months for reasons other than retirement.” This rises to 28 percent in secondary education.

The most common reason was workload (92 percent), followed by government meddling (76 percent) and pupil outcomes or Ofsted inspections (69 percent). Many educators did not feel valued by society (69 percent).

These findings are the result of decades of funding cuts, real terms cuts in pay, excessive workload and widespread stress and anxiety.

Compounding the crisis, DfE figures for teacher recruitment at the end of 2022 show a serious decline in trainee teachers. The DfE missed its targets for recruitment in 2022, with overall numbers in training down by 20 percent compared with last year. In secondary schools recruitment and retention is at crisis point, with only 59 percent of the government's target being reached. Recruitment against targets across all

phases was the lowest this year since at least 2015.

Nearly a third of teachers who qualified in the last decade in England have since left the profession, more than 81,000 people.

Predictions for teacher recruitment show the government is also going to miss targets this year. Only 79 percent of the numbers needed for primary staff will be recruited before the end of 2023 and only 58 percent of secondary teachers. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that teacher vacancies are 93 percent higher now than in the year before the pandemic.

Outgoing National Education Union (NEU) joint secretary Kevin Courtney tweeted in response to the report, “The inescapable conclusion for all who read it is that teacher workload is not only out of control but driving talented people out of the profession.”

The fact is that this crisis is the responsibility of Courtney and the teaching unions. Strike action against the government’s agenda has been throttled.

In the current pay dispute, the only union which even has a live strike mandate is the NEU. Its latest statement, issued as its members held a one-day strike May 2, read, “It is with regret that the NEU has had to take another day of strike action over the issue of a fully funded pay increase for teachers. Gillian Keegan needs to come forward with a better pay and funding offer if she is to avert further strikes.”

There is nothing to be negotiated with the government. To date, £4.6 billion has been given by the Tories to NATO’s war effort in Ukraine, and billions more allocated expanding the UK’s military—all supported by Labour. Their priority is not the well-funded provision of education, health care and housing for the benefit of the population, but to continue shovelling of billions of pounds at the super-rich and preparations for war with Russia.

This means attacking the conditions of the working class. The government’s insulting 2022-23 pay offer of 5 percent plus a paltry £1,000 lump sum, then 4.5 percent for 2023-24 (with only 0.5 percent funded by the government) was made in the knowledge it would be rejected. It then moved quickly to impose the lower award decided, nominally, by the STRB.

Education Secretary Gillian Keegan commented gleefully, “we actually said that’s what would happen if they [teachers] rejected this offer.”

At the end of April, the four main education unions in England claimed they would team up on any future strike action over pay, but no teacher should believe a word of it. Any action at all is being delayed until the autumn term. The NEU said that, based on successful ballot for action in the summer, it would act “*with a view* to co-ordinated action in the autumn term.”

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), despite announcing that they could strike nationally for the first time in their history, will not do so for months—only starting another ballot on April 27.

NASUWT was forced to join the others in a show of “solidarity”, but with no intention of calling strikes again. The union conducted secret talks with the government and pleaded with its members to accept any deal no matter how rotten. In defiance of the NASUWT bureaucracy, 87 percent of members voted in the union’s “consultative survey” last month to reject the government’s pay proposals, and 77 percent voted to strike in opposition.

The only means of preventing the education unions finalising their rout of a determined fightback by their membership is for teachers to organise rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracy.

The Educators Rank-and-File Committee was established in 2020 to help educators break the stranglehold of the trade union leaderships, unify across the education sector, and implement policies in their interests and not subordinate to imperatives of the capitalist market. We call on you to contact the committee and join the fight to build rank-and-file organisations in every school.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact