

Prevention of work-related stress in the education sector

Summary

Work-related stress is one of the most significant hazards of working in the education sector. The level of reported stress in teaching is well above the average for other industries, services and society in general. But it is not just teachers in the sector who suffer from stress, other workers such as cleaners and administrative staff are also affected. This E-Fact examines both the causes of work-related stress in education and ways to tackle the problem. It offers a step-by-step guide to risk assessment, a checklist designed for the education sector and action that can be taken to defeat stress.

Introduction

While there are many different occupations in the education sector, teaching is identified as a particularly stressful job (Smith et al, 2000). Stress among teachers is a contributor to illness as well as a cause for some leaving the profession (Aitken 2002, cited in Verdugo and Vere). A German study ranked the teaching professions as the occupations at highest risk of poor mental health, with teachers in schools for pupils with disabilities and those engaged in the complementary education of apprentices most at risk (Hasselhorn and Nübling 2004).

In the education sector, work-related stress should be tackled at source, with a comprehensive strategy that:

- identifies possible sources of work-related stress, and their underlying causes (whether the work environment, how the work is organised, or the behaviour of colleagues, students, or parents);
- examines the potential impact of work-related stress;
- works with the employees to identify and develop targeted solutions;
- works with the staff to implement those solutions and monitor their effectiveness.

What is work-related stress?

Work-related stress can be said to be experienced when the demands from the work environment exceed the employees ability to cope with (or control) them. It is not a disease, but it can lead to mental and physical ill health. Work-related stress is a symptom of an organisational problem, not individual weakness (European Agency 2000a, 2000b, 2002a).

The European Commission's (1999) definition states that work-related stress is "a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organisation and work



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environment. Stress is caused by a poor match between our roles at work and outside it, and by not having a reasonable degree of control over our own work and our own life.”

Work-related stress is a multifaceted problem that can be linked to the organisational, physical or social characteristics of work and the work environment. It is therefore necessary to assess all aspects of work that can lead to stress, including work equipment and the physical and social environment. In education, work-related stress is often linked to violence, bullying (mobbing), harassment, and unacceptable student behaviour.

Violence at work is any incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted and which endangers their safety, health, well-being, or work performance. It covers insults, threats and physical or psychological aggression exerted by people against a person at work. Workers in education are more at risk to violence when their jobs involve:

- dealing directly with pupils and/or their guardians
- working late or alone
- making off-site or home visits
- working with children with special needs.

Bullying is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee or group of employees that creates a risk to health and safety. In this context, “unreasonable behaviour” means behaviour that a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine, or threaten. “Behaviour” includes the actions of individuals or a group. A system of work may be used as a means of victimising. “Risk to health and safety” includes risks to the mental or physical health of the employee (European Agency 2001).

Sources of work-related stress in teachers

Teachers are not the only workers in the education sector, but they are perhaps the most visible, and there is information on what causes their work-related stress. One study ranked teachers highest among occupational groups in terms of chronic stress. In this study, the single most important stressor was “lack of discipline in pupils and disturbing behaviour” (Schaarschmidt 2005). Cox and Griffiths (1995) identified various sources of teachers’ stress. Among those most commonly cited were problems arising from the organisation of the school and work, lack of support and cooperation, lack of training and career development opportunities, and the nature of the work, including the classroom situation, heavy workloads and disruptive pupils.

A survey by teachers’ unions found the following “top five” stressors (ETUCE 2007):

- Workload / working intensity



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- Role overload
- Increased class size per teacher
- Unacceptable pupils behaviour
- Bad school management / lack of support from management

Legislation

Council directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 (the “framework directive”)ⁱ applies to the education sector and puts in place the structure for preventing work-related stress. The directive, which has been transposed into law in all Member States, has a number of key requirements:

- employers must assess all the risks to workers’ health and safety. In the light of the results obtained from this assessment, employers must take any measures necessary to prevent occupational risks;
- every employer has to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to their work, including psychosocial issues;
- workers are entitled to be consulted by their employer;
- workers are entitled to receive training in health and safety matters;
- workers are also responsible for cooperation on safety and health issues and compliance with preventive measures.

In 2004, European social partners signed a framework agreement on work-related stress, and in 2007, another agreement on harassment and violence at work, with the aim of increasing awareness and understanding of employers, workers and their representatives and put in place a framework for dealing with these psychosocial issues, workplace harassment and violence. The agreements provide frameworks to identify, prevent and manage problems of harassment and violence at work (European Social Dialogue 2004, 2007)ⁱⁱ.

Managing work-related stress

Everyone involved in education, including teachers, pupils, parents, administrators, and safety and health professionals have a role to play in tackling work-related stress. Managing stress at work requires a systematic approach that includes risk assessment and continuous evaluation. Action against work-related stress should consist of:

- aiming to prevent work-related stress
- assessing the risks of work-related stress
- taking action to prevent the harm
- putting systems in place to deal with stress-related issues.

ⁱ Council Directive 89/391 of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work, Official Journal n° L 183, 29.06.1989, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ See the Agency’s fact sheet 47 - Prevention of violence to staff in the education sector <http://osha.europa.eu/publications/factsheets/47>



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Organisational and institutional changes should be introduced to tackle work-related stress, taking the following seven steps:

- carrying out a risk analysis
- undertaking thorough planning of preventive actions
- combining work-orientated and worker-orientated measures
- introducing context-specific solutions
- using appropriate external expertise
- instituting effective social dialogue, partnership, and worker involvement
- taking sustained preventive actions and enlisting senior management support.

Failing to manage risk factors for work-related stress can have important consequences for the quality of service provided to students, as well as the health of workers. Leadership from management, good work organisation, a positive working climate that fosters respect and dignity, and clear communication between workers and supervisors/colleagues are essential to reducing the risk of work-related stress.

Risk Factors for work-related stress

- the culture of an organisation, and how it perceives stress
- the demands made on workers, such as workload
- the control workers have over their work
- relationships at work, such as the occurrence of bullying
- lack of change management
- lack of clarity in workers' roles
- lack of support from colleagues
- inadequate training provision
- failure to cater for individual differences (European Agency 2002c).

A step by step guide to assessing risks in education

Employers are required by law to carry out an effective risk assessment, and risk assessments in schools and other educational establishments should consider the psychosocial risks present; in particular, work-related stress, bullying, and violence. Depending on the issues facing the particular school, there may be a need for different but complementary approaches for work-related stress, violence, and unacceptable pupil behaviour.

A risk assessment is a careful examination of what could harm people in the workplace, allowing employers to weigh up whether they have taken enough precautions or need to do more to prevent harm. A risk assessment involves identifying the hazards present and then evaluating the extent of the risks involved, taking into account existing precautions. The results of an appropriate and thorough risk assessment should reveal the steps that need to be taken to protect workers' health.



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Look for the hazards

Think about the work that is done and how harm could be caused; for example, violence from pupils to staff. Using workers' knowledge helps to ensure hazards are spotted and workable solutions implemented. Consultation encourages workers to commit themselves to health and safety procedures and improvements.

Look for things that may cause accidents and/or ill health to workers. The following approaches may help to identify trouble spots:

- think by geographical area; for example, classroom or workshop
- think by type of hazard; for example, psychosocial issues
- think by job; for example, caretaker, cleaner, secretary or teacher
- think by task; for example, maintenance
- think about how the work is organised; for example, class size, workload, communication methods, division of tasks
- check records, such as the accident book, to identify problems
- ask the workers.

Find out who may be harmed and how

A risk assessment should cover all workers at educational establishments, including teachers, administrative staff, facility management personnel and maintenance staff, regardless of whether they are employed on long- or short-term contracts. A risk assessment may also include pupils and visitors to the school, who are directly or indirectly at risk from hazards. Where there are persons employed by another organisation on site, there is a duty on the two employers to cooperate and safeguard the health and safety of workers.

Risk assessment should take account of differences in workers, such as by gender, age, or disability. For example, younger staff can be less experienced, which can be a contributor to work-related stress. Different prevention measures may be required for these worker groups. Work, its organisation, and the equipment used, should be adapted to the worker, not the other way around. This principle is enshrined in EU legislation.

Workers with disabilities should be considered specifically in the risk assessment process. For example, people with disabilities may be subjected to bullying, which can lead to work-related stress. Consultation with workers with disabilities is vital to ensure a risk assessment is appropriate (European Agency, 2004b), and pregnant workers also require a specific assessment.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ See Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (tenth individual Directive within the meaning of Article 16 (1) of Directive 89/391/EEC), Official Journal n° L 348, 28.11.1992, p. 1



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Evaluate the risks and decide on action

Evaluate how likely it is that the hazard will lead to harm or injury, and how severe that injury is likely to be. Consider what control measures are currently in place and whether they are sufficient. The focus for cost-effective and sustainable risk management should be on collective protection and preventative measures. Questionnaires can be used to assess the extent of work-related stress in an organisation, along with some of the causal factors.

Is someone likely to be harmed? If someone could be hurt:

- can the hazard be removed completely?
- can the risk be controlled?
- can protective measures be taken to protect the whole workforce?
- is personal protective equipment needed to protect the worker from a risk that cannot be adequately controlled by collective preventive measures?

Do not forget to examine what emergency procedures are needed in the event of an incident, such as an assault on staff.

Take action!

Risk assessment is the first step to successful risk management. After completing the risk assessment, list the preventive measures needed in order of priority, then take action, involving the workers and their representatives in the process. Targeting the underlying problems is the most cost-effective method of risk management.

The framework directive sets out a hierarchy of control measures:

- avoid the danger
- replace the danger by a non- or less dangerous process or material
- implement collective protection measures
- individual protection measures.

Interventions should be agreed with the workforce, either directly or through worker safety representatives. The agreed solutions should be carefully implemented, monitored and evaluated. The information arising from the risk assessment must be shared with the appropriate persons. Action should be supported by appropriate training.

Actions should include both preventive measures (to stop the accident or ill health occurring in the first place) and measures to minimise harm in the event of an accident, ill health or emergency, for example steps to take in the event of a member of staff being assaulted.

Review the findings of the risk assessment

Evaluate any action taken to establish what works best, and assess the effectiveness of all control measures. This is particularly important for when dealing with work-related stress as it is multi-causal, and the situation can



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change quickly. When a significant change occurs, check to make sure there are no new hazards that need addressing, and repeat the risk assessment when necessary.

Checklist on work-related stress

The following checklist is intended to help identify whether measures are in place to prevent or reduce work-related stress in educational establishments. It can be used as part of a risk assessment process. The checklist is intended to provide an indication of whether there is a problem and where the problem lies. Working environments vary, so this checklist may not apply to all educational establishments and occupations in this sector. If an issue is flagged up in the questionnaire, it is important to investigate further following a participative approach that encourages workers to discuss the findings, examine the underlying causes of work-related stressors and decide on an action plan.

Checklist for work-related stress in the education sector		
<i>Questions</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Is there a supportive climate or atmosphere that does not tolerate unacceptable behaviour such as violence and harassment?		
Is there a supportive relationship with pupils/students and parents?		
Are stress, violence, bullying, and harassment seen as a "health and safety" issue?		
Are violence, bullying and harassment by pupils/students, co-workers or non-workers covered in the risk assessment?		
Is there access to occupational health support available, either internally or externally?		
Is training on stress, violence, and harassment prevention given to all staff, including managers, teachers and other staff?		
Is training on classroom management available to workers who deal with pupils and students?		
Are workers involved in the risk assessment and management process?		
Are parents/families involved in the risk reduction process; for example, in setting behaviour standards for students?		
Is dignity and respect towards other people taught to pupils/students and is positive behaviour reinforced?		
Are work equipment and the educational environment maintained and monitored; for example, air conditioning, lighting or rest rooms?		
Are excessive demands, workload and frequent needs for overtime monitored; for example, do workers often work late or at weekends?		
Can all workers take regular breaks in designated areas?		
Can workers choose their methods and pace of work?		
Can workers vary their work?		
Are there any resources or procedures for workers to manage competing roles in their jobs?		
Is there a policy on work-related stress?		
Is there a policy to support and reinforce a positive work environment?		



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Are the risk assessment and preventive measures reviewed regularly?		
Does management monitor the workplace health and safety performance (including for work-related stress and other psychosocial issues)?		
Is there monitoring of organisational indicators of work-related stress such as sickness absence, leave interview data or performance?		
Are their measures in place to improve the work-life balance; for example, childcare facilities?		
Are there communication and reporting systems in place?		
Is there worker consultation before major changes to the workplace or work organisation?		

As a separate step, it is important to assess the impact of the identified stressors on the health of workers and the organisation. For schools, these can include frequent interpersonal conflict and high staff turnover, for individuals, these impacts can include:

- Burnout / depression / emotional exhaustion
- High absenteeism
- Sleeping problems / insomnia
- Cardiovascular diseases and their symptoms
- Migraines
- Hypertension / high blood pressure
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Additions (drinking, smoking, drugs) (ETUCE 2007)

Actions to address work-related stress in education

Since work-related stress can have many causal factors and effects, a comprehensive approach to prevention is the most effective, being guided by close collaboration between managers, workers, pupils, parents groups and community organisations. The focus of action should not only be on the social and physical work environment, but also on lesson delivery, staff training, and the organisation of work in the educational establishment. Management commitment is essential

For effective and sustainable stress prevention, a comprehensive risk management programme consisting of risk analysis, identification of alternative actions, prioritisation, implementation and evaluation should be carried out (European Agency, 2000a). Problems should be categorised in terms of risk factors: the job, colleagues, external (for example, family), school/pupils/students, organisational, community and societal. This approach highlights the usefulness of a public health strategy for identifying and managing problems in the education sector (Verdugo & Vere, 2003).

Actions to improve the work environment

- Establish a mentoring or coaching scheme for all current staff.
- Establish a mentoring or coaching scheme for new staff, organised by type of work; for example, teachers or nursery nurses.



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- Develop an information and awareness-raising programme; for example, holding “staff well-being” days or producing newsletters and posters.
- Designate a health and safety representative/coordinator knowledgeable about psychosocial issues.
- When carrying out risk assessments, set up a steering group.
- Reinforce and reward good standards of behaviour.
- Encourage collaborative problem-solving and good communication.
- Create opportunities for feedback; for example, give praise and provide constructive, performance-related feedback.
- Build organisation-wide commitment by demonstrating management support, raising awareness and promoting good practice.
- Provide access to occupational health support (internal or external).
- Ensure all staff know about work-related stress and train them to identify the symptoms of stress.
- Provide training on stress management for managers and workers.
- Develop and encourage employee development and learning to equip staff to improve worker performance.
- Provide training for workers, especially teachers, covering behaviour management and the teaching skills to deal with difficult behaviour.
- Reward positive attitudes and promote positive role models (both for workers and pupils/students).
- For teaching staff, teach and reinforce respect and good behaviour.
- Establish parent-teacher committees and involve them in any change management processes
- Involve staff in the risk assessment process, for example in hazard identification and suggestions for solutions.
- Involve workers in change management processes.
- Encourage involvement and communication with parents and families.
- Check and maintain the quality of the work environment and equipment.

Actions to improve work organisation and workload

- Raise awareness and train managers in the causes and solutions for work-related stress.
- Get a commitment at all levels of an organisation to tackle work-related stress.
- Frequently review workload, demands and overtime.
- Examine the work patterns of staff so that they get “non-contact” time.
- Let workers choose their methods, patterns, and pace of work.
- If necessary, review and redistribute workloads and deadlines.
- Review processes for staff management to ensure that workers are not overloaded, as may occur when they are given multiple roles (e.g. class teacher and topic coordinator and student teacher).

Actions to put policies and support in place

- Develop policies to support and reinforce a positive work environment.
- Develop and implement a written policy on work-related stress for staff.



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- Develop procedures and strategies for stress prevention and assess policies regularly.
- Develop actions with students and parents to improve behaviour; for example, putting in place regular breaks and reward programmes.
- Perform annual assessments of work-related stress and its impact.
- Evaluate the progress of risk management programmes.
- Focus on the long-term process of organisational learning as well as the short-term benefits of high-visibility events and training.
- Use facts and figures to monitor and evaluate any change programmes.
- Perform stress audits on organisational symptoms — for example, high absenteeism, high turnover or poor industrial relations — regularly.
- Carry out audits on violence and bullying.
- Provide childcare facilities and flexible work practices such as job sharing.
- Assess formal and informal communication and reporting lines.
- Establish a system of open consultation prior to making major changes.
- Make stress management part of normal management practice.
- Work with the local community and the media to promote awareness of the impact of stress on teaching quality and the health of workers, and encourage positive, supportive behaviour.

Case study - Preventing stress and burnout among teachers

Teaching children with serious social and emotional problems in an education and treatment centre is difficult. The children can be aggressive and violent, which places heavy demands and emotional strain on their teachers. This can result in stress, anxiety, tiredness, depression and burnout. Special needs education is a priority area for taking action on psychosocial risks. It is an example of where the risk of violence cannot be completely removed, so the need for good management is high.

In one case in Denmark the following actions were taken:

- teachers were given systematic continuous training and development on how to manage the risk;
- all staff and managers had an annual development plan;
- staff received training in communication skills;
- induction training was given to new staff;
- communication was improved by putting in place feedback mechanisms to management ;
- role-playing was used as a method to learn how to develop responses to help prevent problems with children;
- an open and respectful environment was created so that colleagues could express their views and others respond;
- following a physical confrontation, there was discussion with colleagues and managers. The school management was involved and the staff member was also given the option of seeing a crisis psychologist.

As a result of these actions:



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- there was a reduction in the number of physical confrontations between children and staff
- staff absence was cut
- teachers were less frustrated and more satisfied
- children were happier and less aggressive (European Agency, 2002).

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