

Teaching assistants praised as a "class act"

UNISON is calling on parents, students, teachers and school leaders from across the UK to come out in support of the vital contribution made by hard-working teaching assistants, as part of a national celebration day (29 November).

The union, which represents the majority of teaching assistants, is campaigning for TAs to be rewarded for their tireless work through a proper career structure and better pay, terms and conditions. With the dedicated help of TAs, children who would otherwise struggle get support to keep them in mainstream education.

A UNISON survey of almost 8,000 teaching assistants has revealed that 95% believe their job makes a difference in the lives of others, with 83% saying that work gives them a feeling of accomplishment. Yet despite the high levels of job satisfaction, just half said they felt valued as a member of the school team.

As part of the survey, UNISON collected over 700 specific examples of where teaching assistants have had a positive impact on pupil attainment.

The survey also highlights the commitment shown by TAs, most of whom are low-paid women, with 81% saying their workload has increased over the past year, and one in four revealing they regularly work up to two hours per week of unpaid overtime. 11% of respondents admitted working more than six hours of unpaid overtime every week.

UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis, who is meeting with TAs at Coldfall Primary School in London this morning, described teaching assistants as a "class act".

"Schools could not run today without the work of teaching assistants. They help children learn and develop but their role is often not understood or recognised.

"TAs often work long, unpaid hours, have insecure employment contracts and are poorly paid for what they do. We are working towards improved career structures and professional standards for all TAs and want to ensure that they are appropriately trained and deployed. Today we are celebrating the positive contribution of TAs to our schools."

However, the survey also revealed that a growing number worry about the future of the profession. 95% said they were concerned about pay, with 89% concerned about job security and 80% worried about staffing levels.

Schools across the country will be celebrating teaching assistants today with a range of activities, such as meetings with MPs and councillors, student-led assemblies and staff dressing up as superheroes to celebrate 'unsung heroes' in our education system.

Chloë, a Year 10 pupil from Dorset, said:

"I have had loads of support from my TA in both my previous schools. I am so much better at maths now and it's been great to have someone help me in my lessons. Having a TA means that I will be able to pass my GCSEs."

Pat Gordon-Smith, a parent governor from Brixton, said:

"TAs add an enormous amount to the school, not least because they tend to live in the local community."

TAs' work includes giving targeted help to pupils at all levels including those with special educational needs, supporting children with complex health needs, providing pastoral support to children and supporting teachers with lesson preparation. They allow teachers to teach more effectively, with higher level TAs teaching classes on their own, covering planned absences and allowing teachers time to plan and mark.

A UNISON survey earlier this year that showed 95% of head teachers believed TAs added value to schools. They said that a reduction in the number of teaching assistants would impact on children with special education and health needs, on teachers, and the running of schools.

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Notes to Editors:

UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis will be meeting teaching assistants and students for a photo opportunity at Coldfall Primary School in Muswell Hill, London, at 9am on 29 November.

9 million students in England alone are supported by teaching assistants.

A copy of the survey is available from Glen Turner on 0207 121 5555