

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i weithredu diwygiadau addysg](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Implementation of education reforms](#)

IER 46

Ymateb gan: UNISON Cymru

Response from: UNISON Cymru

Nodwch eich barn mewn perthynas â chylch gorchwyl yr ymchwiliad. | Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference.

Summary

UNISON's response is guided by data collected from our three surveys of teaching assistants across Wales over the last six months.

This evidence shows teaching assistants do not feel equipped for the ALN system and new curriculum because they have not benefited from the necessary training.

There is no doubt we are seeing a shift with more children being overlooked and missing out on essential support that they may have previously been entitled to and who are therefore not getting the support they need.

Years of underfunding of schools and low pay awards have created a teaching assistant recruitment and retention crisis as people decide the high level of responsibility and demands of the job are not worth the very poor salary.

Teaching assistants are overstretched and underpaid. They tell UNISON they are not able to support children in the way they would wish.

Things are only going to worsen with the dire financial situation in local government. Insufficient staff is a key challenge to successful delivery of the ALN system and new curriculum.

Training is key

In November 2023, we published the results of our professional learning survey of 409 teaching assistants between May and September 2023.

The survey revealed teaching assistants are not provided with adequate or relevant continuing professional development (CPD) in a career that is ever evolving and becoming more complex. Two-thirds (66%) said they have not received enough training to deliver the curriculum.

24% said that on in-service training days (INSET days), which are meant to be used for staff development, they had been asked to clean classrooms and do photocopying or carry out unpaid school maintenance work. A total of 48% did not participate in relevant training or activities.

When asked to identify specific training that would support them in their role, 29% (the highest figure), said they wanted Additional Needs and Disabilities training. This is even more concerning for a group of the education workforce who are registered with the EWC and yet are not afforded opportunities for training and professional development that teachers and other registrants would access without difficulty.

Teaching assistants play a crucial role in schools and must be given the necessary training. This is essential to support pupils and provide staff with the chance to develop their own careers. It is completely unacceptable that they are being asked to come in, sometimes without being paid, to carry out tasks unrelated to their jobs.

If the Curriculum for Wales is to be successful, the role of teaching assistants and their learning needs must be addressed.

The survey results can be accessed here

<https://cymru-wales.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/sites/9/2023/11/Teaching-Assistant-Professional-Learning-Survey-Report-UNISON-Cymru-Wales-2023.pdf>

Jeremy Miles as Education minister, responded to UNISON concerns by issuing guidance to schools that monies for the training of teaching assistants should be equally distributed between education professionals

through the National Professional Learning Entitlement and that all practitioners should have access to quality professional learning to enable them to deliver high standards and aspirations for all.

Unfortunately, institutional discrimination within schools routinely means, despite this guidance, that TAs do not benefit from the same access to training as teachers and heads. Even when the UNISON Wales Union Learning Fund programme (funded by Welsh government), has stepped in to provide relevant training for free, heads remain reluctant to release TAs saying they cannot afford to cover them.

Implementation of ALN system

More children today are entering school with speaking and language difficulties and personal care issues that require assistance. These are taking up an increasing amount of time for school support staff. When children lack the independence to go to the toilet for instance, often two teaching assistants accompany them, taking them away from the classroom and supporting other children.

Under the SEN system, the TA would look after one specific pupil and oversee that child's needs. Now there is no 1-2-1 dedicated support, and the TA oversees several children with Individual Development Plans (IDP). Responsibility falls on the support staff, not the teacher and the IDP, a legal document, states the TA will deliver the IDP, despite this not being part of the TA job description.

Under the SEN system, a Level 1 TA on the minimum wage would provide the support. Now that same Level 1 TA will do that job as well as being the general TA. A Level 3 should be doing this work. TAs are overloaded and can be pulled into covering other classes because there is no money to pay for enough staff.

We also know of support staff being asked to write IDPs even though the author should be a senior leader. It was a recommendation of the Welsh

government Task and Finish group that it should always be Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo).

Parents can challenge whether the school is fulfilling the IDP and although the new system is still bedding in, support staff have reported problems.

The way of allocating the funding has changed as well. There is a centralised budget for ALN provision, the size of which is not calculated by the number of children with ALN who require assistance. In deprived areas, more children will have ALNs, so there will be much more strain on that local school's budget and support staff.

Desperate funding situation

Local government funding and with it, school funding, is in an absolutely dire state and likely to get worse. The Welsh Local Government Association states there will be a cumulative shortfall across Welsh councils of around £1.6bn over the next three years. The gravity of the situation is such that Welsh local authorities face an existential crisis.

It's common to hear experienced TAs say that their school budget is the worse they have known in 20 years or so in the profession. Severe funding constraints damage our schools and the quality of education and support they are able to provide.

If we take Cardiff as an example, one school is currently looking at making 34 staff redundant. With cuts of such magnitude, it is inevitable for children's learning to be impacted (as well affecting the success of the ALN system and new curriculum). Schools only received their budgets for the year four weeks ago and our UNISON Cardiff branch is already on its fifth school redundancy/restructuring talks.

As of April, in Pembrokeshire schools, the severity of the cuts required means it is teachers, who are much better paid, for the first time being made redundant. So far, no school support staff have been advised they will be made redundant. However, since by the terms of their contract, teachers

must be told of redundancy much further in advance than support staff, we wonder if that is coming.

This isn't surprising because every year, TAs fear redundancy when the school budgets are announced.

Even prior to this year's budgets, things were in a perilous state. Schools are using toy banks for instance, because they don't have the resources. Things don't work if they are not funded properly.

In November 2023, we reported that school support staff in Wales are paying for pupils' food and clothing and stationery, even though many were struggling to cope with the cost-of-living crisis themselves. In a survey of more than 800 school workers, over a third (37%) had helped with food or packed lunches, 35% had helped with uniform costs, and 25% with books and stationery.

However, almost all the school employees (98%) surveyed said they feared their pay wasn't enough to cover their own spiralling bills and other household costs.

One in six workers (17%) had used food banks in the past year, and more than two-fifths (46%) say they'd borrowed money to stay afloat financially.

Teaching assistants have been worn down. In February this year, when UNISON asked nearly 3,000 support staff about what they thought were the main issues affecting schools, they listed increased workloads, budget cuts and staff shortages as their top three priorities. Taking these and 15 years' worth of pay freezes and pay caps into account, it's not surprising that many are considering their future and there are problems with staff recruitment and retention. People are not attracted to such a badly paid job. In fact, in the same survey, a quarter said they would quit their jobs if Welsh government plans to shake-up the school year go ahead.

The survey results can be accessed here:

<https://cymru-wales.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/sites/9/2024/02/UNISON-Cymru-Wales-School-Support-Staff-Survey-results.docx>

After the decade plus of austerity, there is nothing left to cut in schools. An anecdotal example from Pembrokeshire is illustrative here. In the past, schools could have taken the children to the woods for outside learning about nature, but now, because of years of cuts, there aren't enough staff to cover the necessary ratios, so the children lose out. They have got to a situation where they are having to ask parents to help out.

If there isn't the money to fund the right number of staff in schools, we risk failing children. Welsh government must invest to give them the best quality education they deserve.

As a result of our survey results Welsh government officials spoke at UNISON Cymru Wales' February school seminar, and we have now had contact with the Education department national monitoring programme on the working of the national curriculum. Originally there were no support staff on Welsh government's ALN Task and Finish group, but UNISON insisted on the necessity of their inclusion.

Engagement with teaching assistants and their union representatives is essential to make the ALN system and new curriculum a success.