COPING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Robyn Johnstone, Chief Executive Officer of Education Placement Group specialists in teacher recruitment, recently partnered with Education Support Partnership (ESP). ESP is the only UK charity dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of teachers, and its free and confidential 24-hour helpline receives over 7,500 calls a year from education staff who have reached breaking point. Here Robyn (pictured below) answers some questions about the rising mental health issues within teaching...

What issues are teachers facing in terms of their mental health?

Teachers are currently facing high levels of stress, resulting in behavioural, psychological and physical symptoms. Behavioural impacts cause teachers to be more prone to procrastination and mood swings, which may affect their teaching ability. Psychologically, increased work pressure can lead to anxiety and panic attacks, leading to cases of depression. There are also physical impacts of raised blood pressure, tension and regular headaches affecting their performance.

How are schools affected when teachers leave the profession due to mental health issues?

Mental health issues result in teachers suffering from long term sickness, meaning that temporary members of staff are required to cover these absences. This creates stability issues for pupils as children do not have regular and familiar teaching staff, impacting both their performance and behaviour. Schools may also face challenges relating to the recruitment of new member of staffs, particularly for STEM subjects.

How does the Education Placement Group's (EPG) new partnership with Education Support Partnership (ESP) work?

Our partnership aims to raise the issue of mental health and how it impacts the retention of staff in schools. We want to ensure all teachers have access to a support network, whether that is professional or social, in order to help them remain within the profession. It will also help school leaders to understand how their school can support teachers suffering from these issues. ESP and EPG will be working together on a number of events to raise awareness and provide wellbeing advice and support for teachers. We will also be working collaboratively on a Teacher Community which proactively provides trainee teachers and newly qualified teachers with a peer community, professional coaching and guidance with 'real time' wellbeing advice.

What can heads do to reduce the number of teachers leaving the profession?

Head teachers need to recognise that a supportive school culture should be at the forefront of their agenda. A strong and positive culture where teachers are often rewarded and recognised will help with both recruitment and retention of staff. School leaders need to be supported by the senior management team to address the issue as a team.

Head teachers also need to provide sufficient guidance and advice about health and wellbeing for their staff, through well communicated formal policies. Teachers are less likely to seek support from their employer when experiencing mental health issues related to work. A school culture which positively addresses mental health, rather than seeing it as a sign of weakness, will be better equipped to address issues early, before staff inevitably leave.

What should policy makers be doing to ensure that teachers feel valued in their roles?

Policy makers need to understand the current level of mental health issues teachers are experiencing and thus how policy changes can contribute to exacerbating these issues. Unsustainable workload and work-life balance are the two top causes of poor mental health, yet many policy changes, particularly if they are made rapidly, often increase the workload and only make the situation worse. This is particularly prevalent as a major stress for senior leaders in schools, who report that the rapid pace of organisational change is one of the major reasons for leaving the profession.

For further information on Education Placement Group, email info@education placementgroup.com.