

## **Summary of the results of the Fórsa Survey on Assaults, Injuries, Stress and Burnout**

The results provided in the recent survey of education division members on assaults, injuries, stress and burnout in their workplaces are a testament and corroboration to the many arguments Fórsa has put forward to seek better health and safety provisions in schools, universities and across the wider education sector.

The survey responses also demonstrated that the members in the education sector are proud of their work and are also highly motivated, feeling a strong sense of achievement in respect of their work and its contribution to the sector and in wider society.

We had 2816 total respondents. Of those, 94% (or 2640) were female and 6% (or 167) were male. In terms of the age brackets, the majority of our members who responded were aged between 25 and 64, there was 6% between 25 and 34, With less than 1% being in the 18 to 24 age brackets. Of the 25 to 64 brackets 20% were in the 25 to 44 age brackets, 29% between the 45 and 54 age brackets, 33% between the 55 and 64 age bracket. 2% of those who responded were above 65.

In the employer breakdown, 54% of those who responded worked in primary schools, 15% in secondary schools, 9% in special schools, 8% in ITB's, 8% in universities, TU/IT or college, with less than 1% of those who responded in school completion programme, less than 1% and an education centre or 4% in other employments.

77% of respondents were Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), 9% were school secretaries, 7% held other clerical admin roles, 2% were library workers and 2% held management roles whilst less than 1% were a project worker, project coordinator, school caretaker or other category of worker 1%.

It is also clear from the results that working in our education sector and in particular schools, can be an extremely rewarding and fulfilling experience, and that those people who work within the sector are very committed and dedicated to what they do, however, the results also show that it is not without its problems and concerns and the survey responses showed that more can, and should be done.

In terms as to what the main causes of stress are borne from 24% cited a lack of clear communication, 23% highlighted heavy workload, 22% lack of support from management, 8% job insecurity, 5% tight deadlines, 5% stated personal life factors affecting work, 3% cited percent poor work life balance, with the remaining 10% citing "other" reasons.

Whilst it is worrying that the highest percentage of the causes fall to such issues as clear communications, workload and lack of support, the positives that we can take from this, is they are items that are within the scope of what we can affect and improve.

It is no surprise that such issues were highlighted, as many have formed the basis for claims made or representations from the union to the employers over the past number of years. Claims for enhanced job-security and redeployment formed part of our goals on the SNA contract review, and there have been considerable representations by branches reps and the union centrally to give greater consideration and cognisance to Health and Safety measures in Education Workplaces.

It is equally unsurprising (given the large response rate amongst SNAs) that a lack of clear communication and lack of support from management were amongst the highest reasons. These very issues have been raised by the union as we have continuously sought to renegotiate the provisions of the assault leave circular through the past 2 years.

Claims submitted to the Department sought a relaxation of the assault leave provisions, to alter the terminology and move away from an explicit use of the term assault. Whilst it is accepted that assaults can and unfortunately do sometimes happen, they are far lesser in frequency than instances where an SNA may be injured by direct physical contact from a child, that is entirely accidental and unintended.

The union has long argued that simply labelling all instances as an assault, serves as a debarment to members on utilising the leave, as they refuse to stigmatise the children by stating they suffered an assault, when it was clear there was no intent to hurt or cause them harm.

We have also sought an extension of the provisions of assault leave to mirror other sectors such as health and residential care, the ability for SNAs to recommence assault leave in instances where they have returned to work thinking they are fit, only to suffer reoccurrence or flair up of the original injury, whilst also seeking to remove the 21 day cap for pregnancy related H&S leave for pregnant SNAs where a risk to them and/or their unborn child has been identified meaning they cannot be in the workplace.

These have been rejected on the basis of them being cost increasing claims, however, we would argue that when it comes to issues in the nature of Health and safety cost should never be the defining factor, insofar as reasonably practicable. We also believe that there are current hidden costs, in terms of potential claims against schools, and increases in insurance policies by virtue of legal costs, which are not accounted for in any clear terms.

When considering that only 30% of respondents felt their employers conducted a proper risk assessment in the workplace whilst 40% of respondents did not feel that adequate assessment had been carried out, it demonstrates that there is work to do in the education sector to ensure that the employers develop the most basic processes and structures to meet the current legal obligations.

We firmly believe that preventing significant health and safety issues arising, will ultimately reduce costs, whilst increasing productivity and mitigating losses through absences.

Apart from an alteration of these terms we sought that the circular would be made more comprehensive and take a more holistic approach setting out clearer guidance and support for school leaders and their staff.

We have seen the benefits of such a collaborative and holistic approach in recent times with the Domestic Violence circular, where the department not only consulted the stakeholders, but also organisation such as Women's Aid and Spectrum Life (the Employee Assistance Provider), giving the circular a much more rounded and supportive tint.

We would like to see a new circular that is more comprehensive than the current not just setting out the provisions or entitlements, but also setting out guidance and examples of best practise so that school and other educational leaders may feel empowered to sit and engage with their staff and develop ways in which they're working so that health and safety can be given the priority consideration it warrants, with appropriate risk assessments be carried out with the appropriate risk mitigation measures put in place.

This should become the standard, not only in schools but across all Education workplaces, regardless of location or size.

Looking at the responses with regards assaults in the workplace or injuries in the workplace, 55% of respondents indicated that they had experienced an assault while carrying out work duties. Unfortunately, it was not a surprise that 69% of SNAs reported being assaulted at work and 38% of respondents witnessing a colleague being assaulted at work. This is extremely concerning when considering that other students and even young children may be witnessing this also making it a potential child protection concern.

47% of respondents required medical treatment after an assault with some 37% of respondents reporting they required hospital care demonstrates the changing landscape within the education system and the growing need to address Health and Safety within education workplaces particularly within schools.

The main examples of assaults returned in responses included being pushed to the ground, bites, slapped, kicks, punches, scratches, hair pulled, head injuries, being spat at, or hit with school objects, examples sweeping brush table, school bags. We know from discussion with affected members that many of these instances arise where children lose regulation, becoming overwhelmed and frustrated.

Impacts and strikes are more often unintentional and there was no intent on the child to hurt. However, that should not lead to complacency, and it should not just be accepted that this is part and parcel of the SNA role, simply because it is seen as a physical role where they sit or stand shoulder to shoulder with the children in their care.

SNAs, or any worker, has the right to be protected in their workplace and their employer has a legal obligation to make the workplace as safe as is reasonably practicable.

We believe much of the frustration and difficulties being encountered in our education system stems from gaps, delays and inadequate supports in our health system, meaning children are encountering long delays in diagnosis, or having had diagnosis, are not able to avail of the appropriate supports required due to waiting lists, staffing issues etc. This needs cross sectoral focus and attention and must be considered a priority for all Ministers across Education and Health, and across Government in general.

Whilst 54% of those that responded indicated that they received assistance from their employer regarding medical expenses, 46% stated they received no help from their employer with medical expenses, despite the injury being caused in the workplace. This is entirely unacceptable; no worker should have to worry about having to foot their own medical expenses in the event they have suffered an assault or injury in their workplace. It should be par for the course that they would have the appropriate support from their employer, which would likely mitigate against further litigation or claims.

In terms of the training and regular safety briefings, the kind of support mechanisms that could be used to alleviate this, what the survey found was that worryingly half of respondents said that they did not receive regular safety training or briefings in relation to the role, with a further 25% said they received it occasionally and only 15% responded stating that they did receive regular safety briefings or training. Given this is the most basic principle of Health and Safety and the strongest tool in mitigating risk, it is a very worrying to see the numbers and demonstrates the scale of change required, as even a most basic level.

Looking at those supports that workers may receive following an incident only 9% of respondents said that they were offered counselling or additional supports to assist them, only 33% were made aware of the assault leave policies in their workplace with 51% unsure of it and 16% not aware of its existence at all, again supporting that small

steps, such as increasing communications, awareness and understanding can have a significant effect.

The survey results have shown there is work to be done, but there are positives to take, the survey shows that the issues the union has raised here to fore are the issues that are prevalent to our members that responded.

It also shows that the issues are fixable and that incidents can be prevented. Education workplaces are rewarding workplaces, but more can be done to make them safer workplaces for the benefit of staff, leaders, parents and more importantly the children who attend them daily.

Some of the key findings and comments of respondents in relation to their experiences of assaults and injuries in education workplaces were:

- 54% of respondents(1,537) had experienced an assault at work whilst 46% of respondents ( 1,279) had not.
- Staff are not covered for long enough if they have a serious injury. The full pay needs to be extended for work related injury as well as assaults
- Staff are made feel that it's just part of the job it's not and it's not acceptable
- The expectations that staff do anything and everything 'in the interest of the children ' as is quoted to us regularly, often puts our health and safety at risk. This is relevant to physical and mental health leading to burnout. Something as simple as proper seating can be difficult for an SNA to get. After 20 years working in this role...very little has changed!
- The whole process is extremely stressful, when you are have been injured you have to fill in paperwork before you can leave. Being assaulted or injured can be very traumatising. Then having to apply to the BOM for your money back for a doctor or hospital is another long process
- We are getting assaulted nearly everyday. The trauma this is causing to the other children is outrageous, children are so far behind as this takes over the whole class. The system is so broken
- Most injuries could be prevented with behaviour policy, repetitive injuries hit by same child everyday not addressed

Some of the key findings and comments of respondents in relation to their experiences of stress and burnout in the workplace were:

- That stress is an issue for members in workplaces in the Education sector with 89% of respondents cited being stressed some of the time, 49% on a regular basis.

- Issues around communication and HR practices, on the part of management, were cited, particularly around the use of managerial discretion.
- There is a need for greater supports in relation to stress and burnout.
- 47.2% of respondents have considered leave their job citing burnout, 17% on a regular basis.
- Members in the Education sector are proud of their work, are highly motivated and feel a strong sense of achievement in respect of their work and its contribution to the sector and in wider society.

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