

Are parental complaints to schools undermining staff retention?

19 October 2023

An article recently published in the Daily Telegraph *“Teachers are leaving in droves - and pushy parents are to blame”* suggests that the rise in parental complaints is having an impact on staff retention.

Ofsted received 14,900 complaints about schools in the past academic year, an increase of nearly 25% on the previous year.

Ofsted boss Amanda Spielman, speaking at the CST Annual Conference in Birmingham, said people are “grumpier” post Covid-19 and have “greater propensity to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard”.

Complaints culture

We’re also hearing from many schools and trusts concerns of an increasing ‘complaints culture’ with parents escalating complaints prematurely, filing claims with the tribunals/courts, escalating to third parties and taking to social media.

One secondary school maths teacher commented that: *“parents project their own anxieties and stress on to their children”,* applying “adult motives to a child’s world”. He also said that some parents refuse to accept that their own children might be at fault: *“Last spring we had a parent accuse a member of staff bullying their child...This boy would go home every night and complain to his mum about this teacher. After a very stressful investigation, we found that the staff member had followed policies to the letter. The child admitted he had lied and exaggerated the complaints.”*

“A significant detrimental impact on staff”

There is a significant detrimental impact on the staff involved in complaints, whether they are involved in the investigation or the subject matter, as well as more broadly on staff time and resource.

Another teacher told the Daily Telegraph that she had decided to resign from a 15-year teaching career after a pupil alleged she had maliciously thrown a balled-up piece of paper at them. The impact of the investigation (which ultimately proved her innocence) was too stressful and she reported a lack of support to overcome this.

Recruitment and retention crisis

This is happening in the context of a recruitment and retention crisis. Government figures show 2,300 teacher vacancies more than doubling, from 1,098 just two years earlier.

Published in July, a Department for Education (DfE) workforce survey showed nearly 10% of the total workforce, almost 40,000 teachers - the highest number on record - resigned last year.

The number of new entrants to Initial Teacher Training has fallen from 40,377 in 2020-21 to just 28,991 last year, just 71% of the government’s target.

Following a year of strikes, education unions continue to put pressure on the government to improve pay in the sector to address this.

In the meantime, more needs to be done to ensure that the profession is attractive to talented teachers so they are not deterred or driven away by parental complaints.

“A lack of clarity at a policy level”

The number and complexity of parental complaints could be borne out of a lack of clarity at policy level, leaving parents confused about the role of various agencies and process for escalating complaints. This was highlighted in the Academies Regulatory and Commissioning Review. Ultimately this puts a greater onus on schools and staff to not only manage the number of complaints internally but also engage with external agencies.

Available help and support

To try and ease the pressure of complaints on schools, we've put together a [complaints management support pack](#) which is now embedded in nearly 500 schools across the country.

The resources in the pack ensure consistency in schools' approach to complaints, with clear policies and procedures in place that give staff and parents the confidence that complaints will be handled effectively.

Recognising the importance of resolving parental complaints as early as possible to avoid escalation, we've developed a [Continuing Professional Development \(CPD\) programme](#) covering topics which will equip staff with the knowledge, skills and confidence to de-escalate and handle complaints.

There are also a range of free resources, advice and guidance [available on our website](#).

If you would like any further information about the above resources or want to talk to us about a specific complaint you are dealing with, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Key contacts

Tamara Dasht

Associate

Tamara.Dasht@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)330 045 2765

Victoria Hatton

Partner

victoria.hatton@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)330 045 2808

Related expertise

