

Colophon

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Improving staff well-being. Workload pressures on education staff. A persistent problem?
Recommendation of the Education Council issued to the Minister of Education, Sciences and Cultural Affairs, dated August 2002.

The recommendation (in Dutch) can be ordered by using order number 20020235/542.

Summary of recommendation

Improving staff well-being

Workload pressures on education staff. A persistent problem?

For years, workload pressure on education staff has been a major concern. Numerous studies have examined the issue of workload and various measures have been taken to address it. Recent research indicates, however, that workloads are still (perceived to be) too heavy. This advisory report discusses the work pressures on employees in education and proposes a comprehensive set of solutions.

Research findings on workload pressures

Workload pressures on teachers

On a yearly basis teachers rarely work beyond their contracted hours. So at first glance the objective workload does not seem excessive. Part-time teachers, however, work relatively more hours than full-time teachers.

Although the objective workload is not excessive, teachers do complain of heavy workload pressures. This is partly due to the school holiday schedule, which obliges teachers to carry out their duties in a period of 40 to 41 weeks. Also, there are a number of peak activity periods. Other factors that contribute to perceived work pressures are an increasing number of (new) tasks, working with 'difficult' pupils, and the relatively little control over workload patterns. Other factors that play a role relate to work organisation (an inadequately designed set of personnel policies; lack of facilities that enable teachers to perform their duties well; a negative school culture), personal characteristics (age; psychological stability; home situation, etc.) and external factors (such as constantly dealing with social change; the increasing diversity in the pupil population; and the changes resulting from government education policy).

Workload pressures on school leaders

School leaders face severe -objective and subjective- workload pressures. They frequently work overtime (on a yearly basis as well) and as with teachers their work is disproportionately spread out over the year. Changes in their duties and lack of control over workload patterns are some of the factors that contribute to perceived workload pressures.

As to work organisation, organisational changes and uncertainty about task division, responsibilities and powers all add to the workload pressures. In addition, staffing shortages, the changing pupil population and the government's education policies are factors that continue to increase the pressures on school leaders.

Workload pressures on support staff

Support staff are not overburdened but they have little opportunity to utilise their talents. Their work does not challenge them sufficiently, there are few opportunities for development and they have little control over work decisions. Other factors that contribute to subjective workload pressures are insufficient contact with colleagues, and poor communication about the quality of their work and the performance of duties.

Workload comparisons

Compared to other countries, novice teachers earn a reasonable salary but career perspectives pose a problem. In terms of teaching hours and pupil-to-teacher ratios the Dutch primary and secondary teacher faces a heavier workload than his/her counterpart abroad. On the other hand, the Dutch teacher enjoys considerable freedom outside teaching hours.

Compared to other sectors in the Netherlands, education staff give the same marks to their perceived workload pressures as 'the average worker', but compared to highly educated employees only the education sector's marks are fairly low.

The education sector resembles the care sector in a number of respects. The professions in both sectors are characterised by frequent and intensive contact with, at times, difficult and demanding people; a close relationship with the pupil and patient respectively; an increased focus on tailored solutions; and relatively little control over workload patterns. All of these factors have an obvious effect on the subjective workload pressures.

Work and workers

The factors discussed above can be clustered into a three-factor model. These factors relate to job characteristics (task aspects and work *organisation*), employee characteristics (age, experience, workload-bearing capacity etc.) and external factors (social and administrative developments).

In practice, it is not easy to differentiate between the clusters 'work' and 'worker': they interact very much. Given the characteristics of the job and his/her personal characteristics, how does an employee handle workload pressures? To deal with these pressures the employee may adopt an active, problem-solving strategy or a defensive strategy. The Council believes that workload pressures may be eased by offering employees more opportunities to pursue a positive strategy. This will require further professionalisation of the employee and the school.

Recommendations

To help ease workload pressures the Council proposes a comprehensive set of solutions. These solutions are aimed towards the employee (through personnel development and team development) and the employee's duties (through curriculum development and organisational development). They also address external factors (primarily education policies).

Personnel development and team development

The first cluster comprises tools that will equip employees better, thus protecting them against excessive work and burnout. These tools are:

- *Further professionalisation of teachers.* This relates to issues such as handling 'difficult' pupils and team learning.
- *Introduction of a team development plan, with an attendant budget.* This enables groups of teachers and support staff to assume responsibility for their own professional development and educational management. It also allows them to enlist the support of internal and external experts.
- *Reduction in teaching load.* A solution which may suit individual schools.
- *Task and role differentiation.* Attention will have to be given to the necessary culture change.
- *A more flexible working hours scheme.* This should give employees more freedom in making their own choices.
- *A more flexible work schedule.* This should allow employees to work during holiday periods and may also encourage thought on the alignment of tasks and teaching periods with what is common practice in other sectors.
- *Age-aware employee policies.* These should not be restricted to older teachers but should apply to young and old alike.
- *Good employership.* Being employed in special needs schools and in schools with a large number of weighted pupils schools may justify the introduction of a 'special work' allowance. The coalition agreement also recommends such an allowance.

- *Addressing the workload pressures on school leaders.* Assessments, recruitment of managers from outside the education sector and the professionalisation of school leaders could play an important role.

Curriculum development and organisational development

The starting point is that the school needs to develop into a professional and innovative organisation. The building blocks are:

- *Curriculum development within the school.* The curriculum and the learning environment will have to become more challenging. It would be preferable if the work could be carried out within the school (again). School-based curriculum development would require the professionalisation of (teams of) teachers.
- *Learning teams.* These teams are to play a key role in learning from each other; curriculum development; professional development of teachers; enhancing control over workload patterns; developing innovative potential; reducing the workload of school leaders etc.
- *Positive, cohesive school culture.* This will enhance professional and social contacts and promote supportive relationships between colleagues.
- *Greater accountability for own professional performance.*
- *Pleasant work environment.* To be created by investing in school buildings and school facilities.

The third cluster relates to education policies. It comprises the following elements:

- *Support and active encouragement* of the schools regarding the use of the tools outlined above. At the same time, the Council urges the schools to actively develop and implement a comprehensive set of personnel policies.
- *Continuation of the education deregulation process.* Deregulating education will offer schools greater freedom to develop and set their own curriculum.
- *Continuation of staffing policies.* These policies are specially designed to reduce teacher shortages and should be practised in connection with the good employership policies described above.
- *Innovation of the teacher education programmes.* This should contribute to the professionalisation of teaching and to a stronger positioning for the schools as players within the educational infrastructure.

An integral use of the tools outlined above can lead to improved management of workload pressures and/or a reduction in the perceived workload. Many of these tools have been discussed by other bodies. Many of them are already being used. However, this is a complex issue. The development of such tools and their application within the school requires not only time but investments made by the government, the schools and the employees.

The Council holds the opinion that the workload issue is being clouded by a number of assumptions which have crept into current workload policies. The Council believes that it should present a range of options which are not normally discussed. Hopefully, this will trigger discussion of the complete set of tools, in particular the tools that should no longer be considered taboo:

- Professionalisation (of both teachers and school leaders) in the broad sense of the word; training; and career lines in relation to team development and organisation development.
- Creation of more flexible working practices (a more flexible working hours scheme, a more flexible holiday scheme etc.).
- Aligning working and teaching periods with those observed in other sectors (45-47 weeks rather than 40-41 weeks).
- Pay differentiation (a 'special work' allowance) for individual teachers and groups of teachers who work with at-risk pupils and pupils with special educational needs.
- More fundamental interventions in the teacher education programmes in relation to the development of expertise by the schools and within the schools.