

Stress takes its toll on teachers

JOB INSECURITY and the Curriculum for Excellence overhaul have added significantly to stress and mental health problems for Scottish teachers, according to unions.

Here **Michael Alexander** speaks to some of those who have first-hand knowledge of teacher stress in Fife.

A FORMER Fife music teacher whose career came to an end due to stress has called on the Scottish Government to create a system that allows teachers to take a tougher stance against indiscipline in the classroom.

The 63-year-old, who took early retirement six years ago before returning as a supply teacher, said she thought the Government "had its head in the sand" and needed to create a system that facilitated the "removal" of the worst-offending pupils.

The former teacher said the "majority of quiet kids" were suffering because of the unruly behaviour of the few.

She also criticised modern teaching for its "overbearing paperwork".

The former teacher, who spoke to The Courier on condition she was not identified, said: "I was working in quite a difficult secondary school. It was a stressful job. There was lots I enjoyed about it but most of the time it was really hard work.

"It really built up on me. I was off with stress for a while. I lead a very busy life and never stopped.

"I admit, I was working too hard. But it was the indiscipline of a minority of pupils that got to me day after day.

"The workload also got me down — the increasing amounts of paperwork.

"I went down to part-time working because I still wanted to teach, but I still found it quite trying."

She gave an example of the type of classroom indiscipline that she found it difficult to manage.

She said: "I asked someone to do something. He would say 'I'm not doing it'. I would say 'Please go outside' and he wouldn't budge.

"I did have the experience where I would then move the whole class out of the room and the problem pupil would then move out with them.

"When the class came back in he would come back in, and it would start all over again. And of course teachers nowadays can't touch the pupils so you can't throw them out the door."

She said she thought it would "never happen to her", because she also played a lot of sport, but she was overcome with stress.

She continued: "I didn't realise it at first. I was feeling so tired all the time and the doctor did not know what was wrong with me. Eventually they did tests and said there was nothing physically wrong with me and I was told they thought I had depression.

"After being signed off, I slept for a week and was off for six weeks. I was also helped by treatment for anxiety."

The former teacher said many of the disruptive children "don't know how to listen".

She added: "Lots of kids are deliberately disruptive and it holds the rest of the class back. Responsibility has to start at home.

"I would stream kids like they did before. People say the unruly kids have rights, but what about the rights of the majority of quiet kids who get their lives ruined?"

The former teacher said she did not come across situations where teachers were physically assaulted but her head of department was once backed up against a wall in school whilst pregnant.

"He was a lot bigger than her," she added.

"Teachers can't touch them or swear at them, but these pupils know their rights. We also had situations where parents came up to the school threatening the head of department."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "Exclusion from school is a last resort that remains a choice for schools and education authorities can take in individual cases.

"We recognise that it may be necessary to exclude a pupil for a severe or unpredicted incident.

"We encourage all employers to value their employees' mental health and wellbeing and, for any individual worried about stress, encourage them to seek help and advice before it becomes a big problem.

"Local authorities are responsible for supporting health and wellbeing at work for teachers."

malexander@thecourier.co.uk



Unruly pupils make life difficult for teachers who are no longer allowed to use physical discipline.

Budget restraints exacerbating problem

FIGURES OBTAINED under Freedom of Information showed depression, mental fatigue and anxiety cost thousands of working days for teachers throughout the country last year.

Edinburgh City Council said the equivalent of 79 months was lost to such illnesses in 2011, while in Fife 95 long-term stress-related absences were reported.

In Renfrewshire, 51 teachers went on long-term sick leave, and an Aberdeenshire head teacher was off work for 981 calendar days before

returning to school.

Earlier this year the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association, cited the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence and a new deal by which supply teachers are paid only £78 a day before tax.

Budgetary restraints had exacerbated the problem because many councils had axed their dedicated welfare officers, it said.

Dr Cynthia McVey, a psychologist at Glasgow Caledonian University, recently said limited resources available for disciplining children were

one factor behind the high levels of mental health problems.

She also expressed her belief that Curriculum for Excellence has caused problems as she believed some teachers may not agree with the changes and, again, that is stressful.

Councils said they provided a range of support services, including confidential counselling.

According to the Scottish Government, schools have a range of strategies and approaches available to them to address poor behaviour.

These include exclusion and fundamentally aim to promote positive behaviour while tackling negative behaviour at a local level.

Support and training in these approaches is provided by Education Scotland's Rights, Support and Wellbeing Team.

The Scottish Government has stated that it expects councils to take appropriate action at a local level to minimise the risk of stress or injury and any related claims through their own local health and safety procedures for staff and pupils.

People need to take 'time out'

PRIVATE practitioner and college lecturer Mariette Lobo from Dysart is a full member of the International Stress Management Association.

She first became aware of the impact of stress whilst working as a TV archivist with the BBC in London



Mariette Lobo.

and Glasgow. She worked with the newsroom where "everything had to be done yesterday".

Through her interest in complementary and holistic therapy she learned more about stress management and ended up teaching it in the further education sector.

But in recent times she has noted a marked increase in Fifers being treated for stress — particularly workers from the public sector and health service where workloads are increasing, staff levels have been cut and stress-related absenteeism has increased dramatically.

She said: "I think stress has always been there but

people coped with it a lot better.

"They were more physically active and moved around a lot. There was also a lot of support from the extended family. That all seems to have died a death now.

"People live more individual lives and hardly know their neighbours. We have 24-hour society.

"We also have technology which has a lot to do with it. People are always on the phone now. And it's not just the work environment — children are never off their phones.

"There's no more private time. People have a constant urge to be up and about doing something.

"Fear of relaxation is a real phobia. There's a lot of cultural and media pressure to be seen in the 'right places', leading a certain type of lifestyle.

"I don't think there's a quick solution. It's about encouraging people to take time out. To maybe practise simple techniques like breathing. Meditation helps.

"It's really about taking the time, because one of the common things people say is 'I don't have the time'. Well, people have to make the time — and they'll feel the benefits right away."

For further details, contact Mariette Lobo at mfmlob@yahoo.com on 01592 653774.

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