

ESRC Seminar Speech

Thank you Chris, and thank you to Hillary for her welcome comments on behalf of the TDA.

I don't think this Inquiry could come at a more appropriate time. Irrespective of the choice that the public made in the polls five days ago, education was always destined to endure a new period of change.

In education, change is inevitable. Education is at the heart of our ambitions, and is a constant driver of ever-advancing expectations among pupils, parents and politicians. It was no coincidence, therefore, that despite the many differences between the political parties, they all agreed that more change was required in our schools. There was even some consensus, for example, on the view that parents and the private sector should have an increased role in the creation and management of schools.

This is a colossal change. If I had to work in any profession that had to undergo a wholesale change in:

- (i) who employs me

- (ii) what the employer demands from me, and
- (iii) how I am held accountable to them...

...I would not be surprised if my effectiveness was hindered – at least temporarily – because the job that I had built expertise in would have changed. I wouldn't be surprised either if many good people around me chose to leave the profession altogether. If you applied for a job you liked, why would you want to carry on if it changed and you didn't like it anymore?

Anyone who chooses to leave their job in a significant time of change is not 'lacking in resilience'; they are not 'weak' or 'fragile'. They are simply being logical human beings. **If we want teachers to embrace change, stay in the profession and continue to improve their practice, we have to prepare them for change and make a persuasive case for them to stay.**

In a sense, this is what Teacher Support Network aims to do. Teacher Support Network helps teachers to stay happy, healthy and effective - in and out of work - by providing an array of practical and emotional advice.

Our free phone and online services have been available 24/7 for 10 years now, and they were used 160,000 times last year – a record high. But if you simply glance through the newspapers, you'll see that our vision of a happy, healthy and effective teaching workforce is far from realised. Here are just a few headlines:

- 'Science teacher charged with attempted murder of pupil'
- 'Teachers 'face fight with stress''
- 'The despair of Miss Hogg: Was 'inspirational' head driven to take her own life?'

I'm not one to base conclusions on newspaper reports, but they highlight some truly tragic cases. One suicide is one too many. And one stress-induced attack on a pupil is one too many too. Yes, these are extreme cases, but when we look at the wellbeing of the profession at the moment, there is potential for many more saddening news stories like these. Teacher Support Network conducted its last wellbeing survey of the teaching population in late 2008, and it showed that:

- 87 per cent of teachers who responded had suffered from stress in the last two years.

- Two-thirds had experienced anxiety, and 42 per cent said they experienced depression in the same period.
- Over 60 per cent said that issues in their workplace were responsible for these feelings.

Teachers reported a number of worrying problems as a result of stress, anxiety and depression, such as 'problems sleeping', 'lack of concentration', 'loss of confidence', and many said their work performance, as well as the personal and working relationships, had all suffered. Many said they had taken time off work due to these problems, and some even said they had taken the extreme decision to leave teaching. Some said they had even considered suicide.

This is not the description of a workforce that is happy, healthy and effective at work, and Teacher Support Network's research findings are not unique.

- Research by the HSE over the same period showed that teachers lose more working days to mental ill health than any other problem

- Research by the LSE showed that the education workforce has one of the highest sickness absence rates in the country
- And official DCSF figures show that roughly 312,000 teachers a year in England have been taking sickness absence – that's over 70 per cent of full time equivalent (FTE) regular teachers in state funded schools.

I'd like to use the time I have here to talk briefly about the cost of this ill health, the cause of it, and some of the possible solutions.

As you can probably guess, the costs of such high sickness absence are astronomic. According to the LSE, if the education workforce brought its sickness absence rate just down to the UK average, £248 million could be saved. £248 million is enough money to buy around 9 million text books. For any football fans here, £248 million is also enough money to pay David Beckham for nine and a half years.

That said, I also think £248 million is a gross underestimation of the true cost of teacher sickness absence.

Hillary will be able to tell you how much the TDA needs to spend on efforts to recruit new teachers, often to replace those who resign in a state of ill health, for instance. **And then there's the most significant cost – the human cost.** In addition to the obvious tragic affect that sickness absence has on the teacher concerned, as well as their family and friends, there is the damaging impact on the quality of education.

There is a direct, inverse relationship between teacher sickness absence, and pupil attainment. A study by the Department for Education and Skills in 2006, as it was called then, showed that the use of supply teachers tends to decrease in relation to the number of 5A*-C grades attained. Short term sickness is the cause of roughly half of supply cover in primary and secondary schools.

If we want to improve education, we need to ensure that teachers spend less time off sick, and more time working with the children they know best. So how can it be done?

First, let's look at the causes. The Teacher Support Network survey that I mentioned earlier showed that **'rapid pace of change' is the 2nd biggest work-related cause of stress, anxiety and depression among teachers, after 'excessive workload'**. Other leading causes are deteriorating relationships with the school community, namely pupils and school managers, as well as other colleagues and pupils' parents. In a way, we could actually view deteriorating relationships and excessive workload as examples of change too. **As I said earlier, we need to prepare teachers for these changes and make a compelling case for them to stay.**

So how do we prepare teachers for change? **If change is inevitable, we need teachers who expect it and know how to manage it.**

The TDA is undoubtedly key to achieving this vision. We are currently working with the TDA and National College to entrench critical wellbeing training and awareness into different stages of teacher training, from Initial Teacher Training and CPD, to the new Masters in Teaching and Learning and NPQH.

This is a fantastic step forward. If teachers can be trained to look out for their own wellbeing and that of their colleagues, we can create a culture in schools where staff support each other through change.

Right now, **teachers tell us that there is a culture in schools where people are afraid to admit when things get difficult.**

They tell us that they are afraid to talk to staff about any problems in case it is seen as a 'sign of weakness'. And they are precisely the people who end up going on sickness absence, or even leave the profession, because they cannot get the support they need in school to cope with change.

It may sound contradictory, but I think that a resilient teacher is one that is open about their frailties, aware of their wellbeing needs, and professional about addressing them.

If we want teachers to be resilient in this true sense, we need to foster a supportive culture in schools. Giving staff appropriate wellbeing training is a vital step forward to the realisation of this aim.

(Possible space to show Shift 'I'm fine' video, if appropriate facilities are available)

This is only the start. Employers, governing bodies, and other support services – such as HR and Occupational Health staff – can all do much more to assist schools through change.

Rather than go into detail here, I would urge you to look at the DCSF Common Mental Health Problems guidance, which Teacher Support Network helped the department to produce and distribute last year.

We also need to see greater tailored support in the areas of greatest concern that I mentioned earlier. Like it or not, teachers are saying time and time again that they feel overwhelmed by their workload. They are also saying that deteriorating relationships with pupils, colleagues and pupils' parents are a real concern, so for the sake of better educational achievement, let's look at these issues again.

Some fantastic work has been done in these areas – such as the Steer Behaviour Review – but when teachers continue to express concerns, we must listen to them and take on board their ideas.

I think that all stakeholders, including Teacher Support Network, can be even more proactive in response to teachers' concerns, and we need to be if we want them to stay in the profession.

All of this is part of making a compelling case for teachers to stay.

In these new political times, if we can create a supportive staff culture, backed by supportive stakeholders, I honestly believe that we will see positive change in teachers' attendance, retention and effectiveness combined with huge financial savings. This is why, to me, this inquiry is so important and so timely. I really look forward to discussing this important issue further, and beyond today, Teacher Support Network will be happy to assist the inquiry in any other ways it can.

Thank you again for affording me your time today.