

Top 10 tips on how teachers can improve their work-life balance

Experts share their views on how teachers can manage workloads and avoid burnout - without falling behind on marking

· How can teachers get a better work-life balance? - live chat

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Take up a hobby and make sure you get a good night's sleep to help maintain a healthy work-life balance. Photograph: Neale Haynes/Rex Features

As part of the Guardian Teacher Network's wellbeing fortnight, we attempted to tackle the mother of all teacher complaints: work-life balance.

We recently brought together experts this issue. Below is a round-up of the best bits of their debate - if you want to follow what was said in full, check it out here.

Give students word limits to ease marking

When I taught English I found it worked well sometimes to give pupils a word limit. If they couldn't write at too great a length, they were far more selective and thoughtful about what they included, the quality of their writing went up and my marking load went down - a win-win situation. Also, writing succinctly and within constraints is a good life skill for students to have in the future.

- *Jill Berry is former headteacher of Dame Alice Harpur school in Bedford and an education consultant.*

If you're fit and healthy you'll perform better in class

Things like having a hobby or making sure you get a good eight hours' sleep a night can make the world of difference. What makes teaching unique is that teachers personally invest in their students and the success of their school, which can make it harder to switch off. But we strongly believe that healthier teachers can lead to higher marks. Absenteeism is costly but presenteeism is also a growing problem. So don't feel guilty about taking time for yourself. If you are fit and healthy - physically and mentally - you will be able to perform better in the classroom and do the best for your pupils.

- Julian Stanley is chief executive of the Teacher Support Network.

Think about when you work best

Think about the quality of time as well as the quantity available. About 20% of a working day is prime time and, used well, should produce 80% of your best work. The rest of your time will be nowhere near as productive, so it's worth recognising which part of the day is best for you and maximising it to get something demanding done rather than flogging yourself when you're tired.

- Sara Bubb works in the Department of Early Years and Primary Education at the Institute of Education.

Change your mindset

Stepping out of the "victim" mindset and being more assertive about what you can and can't do, and will and won't do, is one way of achieving a better work-life balance.

The only thing is, there is always something more you can do. You can always put a little bit more effort into supporting a child with special educational needs, trying to close the gap between boys and girls, or pupils on free school meals and others. There is no limit to what you can do and it's probably that that prevents teachers from switching off after work.

- Agnieszka Karch is a research team leader at The Key for School Leaders.

Don't take your work home with you

Work professional hours (I get to school at 7am and leave around 4.30pm) and if it's not done within those hours it cannot be that important. Have a prioritised to-do list and stick with it. Planning for progress and providing feedback to the children should always be at the top of this list. This will lead to improved outcomes for pupils and if your results stack up then the powers-that-be will have nothing to throw at you.

- Joe Durham is a qualified secondary teacher and co-founder of the Timemanagement4teachers website.

Make time to socialise

When we feel stressed, anxious or depressed we may shy away from social events. However, connecting with the people around you (your family, friends, colleagues, neighbours) and

actively building these relationships/creating a support network is extremely important for your mental health.

- *Nicola Kershaw is a mental health and wellbeing advocate working with a number of charities including Mind and Time to Change.*

Support others and be supported

Work with the strengths of the people around you and actively seek support from them, if you need it. Actively give support too: someone needs to start a change of direction and you could be the one to do it.

- *Andrew Staples is a primary teacher working four days a week in school with targeted intervention groups across key stage 1 and 2.*

Look at things mathematically

I often look at teacher workloads mathematically. In the US, we see a lot of folks complaining about paperwork because lots of our time is occupied by things that seem unrelated to what's actually happening in our day-to-day. For example, why have all these meetings to talk about pedagogy when we could easily grade a set of papers so we don't have to take them home?

Remarks about "spurious data entry and analysis" are critical too; we really have to start looking at what data matters and what information we glean from it. Unfortunately, that gets lost in trying to become data managers.

- *José Luis Vilson is a maths teacher for a middle school in New York City.*

If you're struggling speak out

What's most important is that all teachers feel confident to speak out if they feel overwhelmed. Don't shy away from showing what you fear might be considered weakness and share your concerns with supportive leaders. We need to be at our best to make a difference.

- *Oliver Beach is a 2012 Teach First ambassador and appeared in the BBC documentary Tough Young Teachers.*

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