Support staff conference a roaring success

More than 90 members turned out on a wet Saturday in February to take part in ATL’s first-ever support staff conference.

The conference, held at Etc Venue’s Bishopsgate complex in central London, saw support staff members from all over the country, and from the state, independent and FE sectors, gather to hear leading speakers talk about the current challenges in education, and to benefit from a wide array of CPD opportunities.

ATL president Alison Sherratt kicked off proceedings, and heaped praise on the TAs she had worked with over the years in her capacity as an early years teacher.

General secretary Mary Bousted then followed up by congratulating ATL’s Support Staff Members Advisory Group (SSMAG) for organising the conference, and said that it represented another step forward for support staff in ATL.

“ATL is in no doubt that our schools would not have improved and met their current standards of achievement without the work of support staff,” she said, “often unthanked, undervalued and certainly underpaid – but essential. Our schools simply could not run without you.”

Because of the low pay, Mary explained that it was only right that ATL had extended its 50% subscription offer for the first year of membership to support staff members. See page two for details.

She went on to remind members of ATL’s campaign to stop the use of TAs as teachers.

“Schools are getting teaching on the cheap and selling children short by using TAs, cover supervisors and HLTAs to teach children on a regular basis rather than employing qualified teachers,” she stated.

Mary also highlighted the issue of classroom observation of support staff, explaining that ATL has produced a detailed factsheet to advise on best practice (see page four for more about this).

The pay and grading agreement with the Girls’ Day School Trust was one notable success from the last year, Mary said, pointing out that the agreement covering 24 independent schools would “put more money in members’ pockets than the previous ramshackle system”.

Mary concluded by explaining ATL’s ‘Shape Education’ campaign to influence political parties as they write their manifestos in the coming months. Details are at www.atl.org.uk/shapingeducation.

“ATL will be pressing the politicians on behalf of support staff,” she promised. “We want them to make their intentions clear and we want Labour to commit to the resurrection of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body, which the Tories shamefully cut as one of their first acts after their election in 2010.”

One member described Mary’s speech as:

“Enthusiastic, personable and making us feel we belong.”

Next into the breach was Paul Dix from Pivotal Education, who gave a very interesting and entertaining talk on practical approaches for excellent support professionals, managing children’s learning while managing the behaviour of adults, and the importance of support professionals in driving achievement and maintaining standards.

“Inspiring and thought provoking.” was one member’s assessment.

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Support staff conference a roaring success (continued from page one)

And all this before a quarter to 12! Then it was time for some hands-on learning.

Lisa Miller, from Practical Tactics, led a session on behaviour management. “Fantastic – putting this into practice will really help,” said a delegate.

Kate Quigley, ATL’s learning and development manager, reprised her popular session on assertiveness. One attendee proclaimed: “I can’t wait to get started on the new me!”

Ronnie Young from Lighthouse Professional Development, spoke about working creatively with SEN children in the curriculum.

Jacqui O’Neill, ATL learning and development officer, addressed the ever-growing problem of lone working for support staff, particularly in libraries and playgrounds.

“A very informative session. Very interesting to hear the diversity of roles and issues,” commented one member.

A hearty and healthy lunch was then consumed, with lots of networking and debate along with it, and then after lunch the CPD sessions were run again, meaning that everyone had a chance to attend two of the four topics on offer.

The day concluded with a question and answer session, led by lead member for support staff Debbie Polwarth and national official Peter Morris. Topics covered included the future of HLTAs (“Is there one?”); Hertfordshire moving away from the Green Book on sick pay; zero-hours contracts; working beyond contracted hours; and the perennial problem of low pay.

The conference finally came to an end at 4.30pm, with everyone agreeing it should become an annual event.

Half-price membership for new support staff joiners

ATL’s offer of half-price subscriptions for the first year of membership has been extended to all categories of membership, including support staff. See the new rates at www.atl.org.uk/your-membership/standard-support.asp.

Help shape support staff policy

You can now apply to become a member of ATL’s Support Staff Members Advisory Group (SSMAG) for the period 2014-16.

SSMAG ensures all decision-making is member-led. Its remit is as follows:

• To consider and advise ATL’s Executive Committee on all matters relating to support staff pay, conditions of employment and working practices in all sectors.
• To recommend and disseminate advice and best practice on all matters relating to support staff.
• To advise on issues pertaining to support staff organisation within ATL.

The group meets three times a year, on a termly basis, on a Saturday morning. Travel and subsistence will be paid, and overnight accommodation if needed will also be paid for, with the prior approval of the honorary treasurers.

TEN standard members will be elected, from around the UK.

Members can nominate themselves. Members are also asked to provide a supporting statement of no more than 200 words.

The Executive Committee will decide upon the successful candidates. In making its decisions, it will seek to ensure that SSMAG represents as many of the different sections of the support staff membership as possible, eg sectoral (early years, primary, secondary, academies, independent, FE, sixth form, etc) and occupational (TAs, librarians, technicians, administration, etc).

Individual nominations and supporting statements need to be with Heather Ralston at hralston@atl.org.uk by 10am on Monday 16 June 2014.

For more information on the work of SSMAG, or any other queries in relation to the elections, please email Peter Morris at pmorris@atl.org.uk or see www.atl.org.uk/ssmag.
An ode to TAs

Teresa Clayton-Murrell is an ATL member, and has been the SENCO at an all-boys secondary school in Hertford for the past 15 years. Prompted to write to ATL by the feature ‘Adding value’ in the October 2013 issue of Report, she outlines her work in an ever-changing environment, and praises the dedication of her classroom colleagues.

A role that started as a post coordinating provision for pupils with statements and liaising with external agencies on issues like speech and language has grown to encompass provision for all types of extra needs.

A few years ago there were two phrases that were in constant use, which looking back I can clearly see greatly influenced the way the SEN department supported pupils in school: they were ‘Every child matters’ and ‘Know the whole child’.

One impact was a change in the title of the department, which became known as AEN – additional educational needs – taking into account that every child could have an extra need at any time in their school life.

Another was the creation of an inclusive AEN register: information collected about the whole child through interviews with parents, from feeder schools and from external agencies.

The AEN register – or the Pink Book as it has become affectionately known due to its highly visible lurid pink cover – has become a bible of information for subject staff and heads of year, informing their planning and lesson delivery.

It also helped to create a provision map of needs. It became apparent that we needed to provide much more than TAs in classrooms. We needed to provide safe places for our pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), homework clubs for those pupils with a less supportive home background, social skills groups, and friendship, board game and film clubs for the less sporty.

A supportive senior leadership team and a good relationship with heads of year and form tutors all helped to build an inclusive environment.

However, it is the TAs, our unsung heroes, who have made the greatest contribution to the inclusive work of the AEN department. The team have been with me for most of the last 15 years and have embraced their role of supporting in the classroom and much more. Each TA has developed a specialism over the years that has made each of them invaluable in the support role.

I have a TA who completed her HLTA as a SEN admin assistant, and then went on to take responsibility for coordinating the exam concessions, extra time, readers or scribes, needed by several of our pupils.

Another TA completed HLTA status in English and a university qualification to enable her to work with pupils with ASD. She has run several social skills groups, manned a safe area for those with ASD and has been seconded to the English department to help with the teaching there.

TAs have become behaviour specialists and counsellors/mentors; others have become expert in supporting in maths and science. One TA has taken a great interest in dyscalculia and is working one-to-one with pupils who have developed a fear of numbers.

I have been extremely lucky with my team; they have all given to the role far more than I can give them. Financial rewards for their time are not always possible; however, knowing how they work and where their interests lie has enabled me to reward them with job satisfaction, which I know they really value, otherwise why would they stay for 15 years?

If you have any views or experiences of your support staff role that you would like to share with ATL, email national official Peter Morris at pmorris@atl.org.uk.

Teresa and her team
ATL sees the spread of formal performance management as recognition of the increasing professionalisation of support staff roles, but believes the lack of any central guidance has led to a number of problems.

In particular, excessive or unfocused classroom observations of TAs, HLTAs and cover supervisors can lead to increased anxiety and stress for the staff being observed. Consequently, ATL members have called for more structured advice on coping with the challenges of observations at work.

The factsheet, Classroom Observations: Support Staff (ADV65), answers many of the most commonly posed questions from members, such as:

- Who may be observed?
- When might observations take place?
- What should the observation cover?
- Can I be observed as part of an Ofsted inspection?
- What notice, if any, should be provided prior to an observation?
- Who should carry out observations?
- My school is seeking to impose a policy on classroom observations without consulting staff – what should we do?

Only three in 10 (31%) nursery and primary support staff say their school has a written policy in place to deal with pupils wetting or soiling themselves during the school day, according to a survey of ATL members.

In addition 88% reported they have never received any training in dealing with childhood continence issues. This is despite the vast majority – 81% – reporting that their school expects support staff to deal with children who have wet or soiled themselves.

Although nursery and primary schools expect support staff to clean up those children, more than two thirds of support staff members (70%) stated that it is not officially part of their job description or employment contract.

Dr Mary Bousted, general secretary of ATL, said: “Having to deal with increasing numbers of pupils who have not yet been toilet trained puts extra pressure on education staff when they have enough pressure on them already.

“Schools need to give staff clear guidance on how to deal with toileting accidents so they know what they are allowed to do and who should be dealing with an incident. It is also important that education staff feel they have support from their school nurse or headteacher, and that they know where to get guidance should they need it.”

A summary of the results is below and the full survey can be found at www.atl.org.uk/recentsurveys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is it stated in your job description and/or contract of employment that you are required to attend to a child who has soiled/wet themselves?</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are all support staff expected to change children who soil themselves?</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever received any training in how to deal with childhood continence issues?</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the school/nursery have a written policy for dealing with incontinence and toilet training problems?</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do parents have to provide written permission for their child to be changed while at school/nursery?</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
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