

A charter for support staff

March 2015

ATL believes that all school support staff play a vital role in the education of our children. But all too often, support staff are not viewed this way by other education professionals. This charter has been designed with two objectives in mind: to provide an easy-to-use vehicle for ATL members, branches and school ATL reps to raise the issues it addresses with school management, governors and colleagues; and to act as a working document for ATL support staff members, providing links to further information and advice and so helping them tackle immediate problems.

Background: from peripheral to indispensable

The significant rise in the numbers of all types of school support staff over the past two decades has been nothing short of staggering. From being seen as ‘paint-pot washers’ in the classroom, and second-class citizens in the case of administrators and ancillary staff, it is now accepted that schools could simply not function without this major new population of education professionals.

According to figures¹ published by the Department for Education (DfE) for 2013, the number of administrative staff and technicians in maintained schools and academies in England stood at 188,100, while 262,200 jobs were classified as auxiliary staff (catering, caretakers, cleaners). Meanwhile there were 369,700 teaching and learning assistants of all kinds, including higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) and cover supervisors, employed in English state-funded schools.

The numbers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were proportionately comparable, and this means that in the UK as a whole there are at least 900,000 people employed in a part-time or full-time role in a school support staff capacity. To put it another way, two per cent of potential voters are school support staff.

The growth in numbers really took off in 2003, when employers, the Government and the education unions signed the historic Workforce Agreement². Among other objectives, the agreement aimed to “raise standards in schools by tackling workload and freeing teachers to focus on teaching and learning”.

This latter aim led to the creation of two new school roles – the HLTA³ and the cover supervisor. The new roles, combined with the growth in the numbers of teaching and learning support assistants generally, have been recognised to have had positive benefits on outcomes for pupils: “Trained and supported teaching assistants can have a positive impact on the progress of individual or small groups of children, in the development of basic literacy skills” (Institute of Education Report, 2009⁴).

Enter ATL

Formed in 1884, ATL traditionally supported teachers in independent and state schools, and more recently FE college lecturers. Soon after the Workforce Agreement was signed, ATL received membership applications from increasing numbers of support staff who said they would prefer to belong to an education union with its own network of school reps and proven expertise in school and classroom matters.

ATL now has close to 20,000 support staff members and a Support Staff Members Advisory Group (SSMAG)⁵ providing them with a voice in our union’s democracy, annual support staff conferences⁶, dedicated publications⁷ and a national official⁸ with overall responsibility for support staff matters, which constitute a comprehensive and bespoke package of union benefits. The SSMAG has played a key role in drafting this charter.

ATL's charter for support staff

ATL calls upon all education stakeholders – the Government, politicians, school management and governors – to consider the terms of this charter, and where possible, to implement them.

Pay

In spite of the vast increase in roles and the responsibilities of all categories of support staff, pay levels⁹ remain woefully inadequate, with many support staff stuck in a permanent poverty trap.

To add insult to injury, pay rates across the country are wildly inconsistent, and differences in the going rate for particular roles can add up to thousands of pounds per year. The lack of a national pay framework is the problem, and ATL wants to see a national body¹⁰ reconstituted to address the issue.

Another problem is the widespread use of term-time-only (TTO) pay contracts¹¹. Unlike teachers, most support staff are not paid all year round, thus reducing their already notional low pay even further. ATL believes support staff should be paid on the same basis as teachers, and that TTO pay (but not contracts) should be phased out.

Job descriptions and contracts

A written contract of employment¹² is a legal requirement, and a job description¹³ should also be provided by any reputable employer.

A job description should reflect all of the key aspects of the job. In particular, it should not be a partial document, ie omitting essential parts of the job, perhaps to preclude the possibility of a claim for improved grading. There should also be scope to review¹⁴ the job description, perhaps as part of an agreed performance management process, and where there are consequential changes to responsibilities there should be scope to review the grading of the job.

Particular clarity in the job description should be provided on issues that impinge on child protection, such as dispensing medication¹⁵ and toilet training¹⁶.

Working hours

ATL member surveys invariably show that, like teachers, support staff work beyond their contractual hours on a regular basis¹⁷. It is no exaggeration to say schools could not function without the degree of goodwill shown by their support staff, who work a significant amount of unpaid overtime during the course of the academic year.

ATL does not want to encourage a culture of 'clock-watching' by highlighting this, but it is in the power of schools to recompense their lowest-paid members of staff on a sensible basis by offering to pay overtime, time off in lieu (TOIL), or, where additional hours are a regular feature of the job, to adjust the contractual hours accordingly.

Continuous professional development (CPD)

When it comes to organising and funding training and CPD¹⁸ events, support staff are often overlooked by schools. Priority is generally given to teacher CPD, with the support staff being involved as an afterthought, if at all.

ATL believes INSET days should be used to organise either joint teacher-support staff training or separate support staff events. Also, funding for external training should be made available for support staff, and not restricted to teachers. Finally, particular help should be considered for support staff to achieve an appropriate level of basic skills, eg in maths and English.

ATL's nationwide network of union learning reps (ULRs)¹⁹ can also be used to run school or local training events. An increasing number of ATL support staff members are becoming ULRs, and are ensuring events relevant to support staff are organised.

Continued

ATL's charter for support staff

Violent and abusive behaviour

ATL believes education staff should never be subjected to abuse or threats of abuse, whether verbal or physical²⁰. Sadly, this problem shows no signs of abating and too often support staff find themselves in the frontline, with little or no support forthcoming from school management, which can too often treat physical and verbal attacks as an occupational hazard.

ATL's practical approach on violence, threatening behaviour and abuse²¹ from students, visitors (including parents) and intruders is first and foremost to press for protection against such behaviour. In all cases appropriate support must be provided by employers, and legal sanctions against perpetrators should be pursued, in consultation with the individual member concerned.

The school should also have a policy on dealing with disruptive and violent behaviour and should provide appropriate training for staff, including in the use of de-escalation techniques.

HLTAs/cover supervisors

HLTAs and cover supervisors are routinely used in an inappropriate fashion²², and are rarely compensated when this happens.

For example, HLTAs and cover supervisors are often used to predominantly or exclusively cover teachers' planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time, are forced to

deputise for absent teachers for a whole term or more, and are expected to plan, prepare and deliver lessons to whole classes – in other words, to teach.

These abuses are unacceptable. They are unfair on the support staff member, who is often not trained and certainly not paid to undertake such duties, and it is unfair on the pupils, who have the right to be educated by a qualified teacher. Such abuses can also often lead to ludicrous situations, such as where an HLTA or cover supervisor takes a whole class on their own, without the usual support staff member (often themselves) or a replacement present as back-up.

When they come to light, such instances of abuse are challenged by ATL, as they are clear breaches of the 2003 Workforce Agreement.

Respect and professionalism

Support staff of all categories are education professionals, and deserve to be treated as such by governors, headteachers, management, teachers, parents and pupils. Whether regarding pay, working conditions, training, a defined career path or the freedom to work in a non-threatening environment, support staff should be given the respect and consideration they are due. Without support staff, most schools would simply not be able to function, and this fact should be acknowledged by all stakeholders, including politicians.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335413/sfr11_2014_updated_july.pdf

² www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DfES%20172%20200MIG1975.pdf

³ www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/classroom-practice-publications/higher-level-teaching-assistants.asp

⁴ www.ioe.ac.uk/DISS_Strand_1_Waves_1-3_Report.pdf

⁵ www.atl.org.uk/rep-zone/getting-active/support-staff-group.asp

⁶ www.atl.org.uk/events/support-staff-conference-2015.asp

⁷ www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/newsletters/atl-support.asp

⁸ www.atl.org.uk/rep-zone/be-our-rep/support.asp

⁹ www.atl.org.uk/pay/pay-negotiations/support-staff-news.asp

¹⁰ www.atl.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/shape-education/read-our-manifesto.asp

¹¹ www.atl.org.uk/pay/pay-negotiations/support-staff-pay-background.asp

¹² www.atl.org.uk/help-and-advice/rights-and-conditions/support-staff-rights-England.asp

^{13 & 14} www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/factsheets/support-staff-job-descriptions.asp

¹⁵ www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/factsheets/administering-medication.asp

¹⁶ www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/report/2013/2013-march-toilets.asp

¹⁷ www.atl.org.uk/media-office/media-archive/Overworked-and-underpaid-support-staff-are-feeling-the-knock-on-effects-of-teachers-excessive-workloads.asp

¹⁸ www.atl.org.uk/help-and-advice/performance-management/continuing-professional-development.asp

¹⁹ www.atl.org.uk/learning-zone/resources-ulrs/ulr-toolkit.asp

²⁰ www.atl.org.uk/publications-and-resources/legal-employment-advice/violence-threatening-behaviour-abuse.asp

²¹ www.atl.org.uk/help-and-advice/assaults-and-abuse/if-you-have-been-assaulted.asp

²² www.atl.org.uk/Images/atl-support-spring-2013.pdf





Now that you have read the Charter, we would ask you to:

- Print off copies and share them with your support staff colleagues
- Place a copy on the school noticeboard
- Present a copy to your line manager, Head, Governors, etc., and ask them to consider its terms

To order colour copies of the Charter, please email me at pmorris@atl.org.uk.

And to let us know how the Charter has been received in your school, please email me with the information.

If you and other ATL members would like a member of our organising team to visit your workplace please email organise@atl.org.uk with your full contact details and the name of your workplace.

Yours sincerely

Peter

Peter Morris
National Official

Are you interested in finding out more about or becoming an ATL Rep?

Visit the Rep Zone on our website: <http://www.atl.org.uk/rep-zone/be-our-rep/welcome.asp>