

Support Staff

We are delighted to welcome an article from Phil Revell, Chief Executive of the National Governors' Association (NGA). Phil was one of the speakers at the NGA Spring Conference in Leeds and it was on account of his presentation, on the above topic that we approached him to write for us. Prior to his role with NGA, Phil had been a journalist and, before that, a teacher, so he is well-equipped to write on this subject.

Phil writes:-

The Workforce Agreement - Timeline

Jan. 2003	Agreement signed
Sept. 2003	24 Administrative tasks removed from Teachers
Sept. 2004	Cover limited to 38 hours per year.
Sept. 2005	PPA time – ½ day a week for planning preparation and assessment
Sept. 2009	'Rarely cover'

It has been more than six years since major changes to the education workforce were negotiated between the government and the education unions.

Over that time we have seen a culture change in schools, with more team working, a redefining of the Headteacher role, and a change in the professional relationships between staff.

There are now three times as many support staff working in schools as there were in January 2003; many large secondaries now have more support staff than teachers.

Six years on there are however some real issues for governors. How are support staff being used; how will governors implement the next phase of the deal, which will see teachers expected to be required to 'rarely cover' for colleagues.

On the first issue there is widespread evidence that some support staff are being exploited by schools. The new role of Higher Level Teaching Assistant is a good example of this. The role description for HLTAs set out in

government guidance makes it clear that this is a professional and management role. HLTAs should be leading other support staff; HLTAs should have a role in lesson planning. Yet in some schools HLTAs are being offered term time contracts, and in others HLTAs are being paid variable hourly rates; one a higher rate when working in a 'teaching' role, and on a much lower rate when on other duties.

Governors ought to be asking their Heads to justify this split level payment. Are teachers paid in this way; is a teacher on playground duty paid for that time as a lunchtime supervisor?

In the NGA's view this kind of split level payment is rarely justified, and neither is the practice in some other schools, where non HLTA staff are being employed as cover supervisors on rates of pay which are not significantly above the minimum wage.

These issues matter, not just because of the moral case for establishing a proper pay structure, but also because the landscape is changing. The government is currently taking powers to remove Governing Bodies which have failed to implement the workforce agreement – and that agreement includes support staff. A new negotiating body will shortly leap into being to set national rates of pay and conditions of service for support staff. Those schools which have been taking advantage of those staff are in for an unpleasant budgetary surprise.

On the issue of cover the situation has, unfortunately, become less clear. Up until now the requirement was that Teachers should not be required to cover for colleagues for more than 38 hours per year – about an hour per week. In September that changes.

But the phrase 'rarely cover' is, in the NGA's view, inadequately defined in the new guidance, which can be found on the TDA website. From a situation where we had a clear benchmark we have moved to a situation where different interpretations will be possible depending on school circumstances. Unforeseen absence is not unusual, a typical example being when a member of staff is taken ill or has to leave the premises to deal with personal issues during the school day. Focusing on planned and foreseen absence, as the new guidance does, therefore leaves large gaps where schools will have to arrive at their own local interpretation.

The process note that accompanies the WAMG letter acknowledges this, it says:

"It is not possible to provide a national template for implementing 'rarely cover', because schools are at different points in their implementation journey and will have different contexts and patterns of absence. All implementation strategies will therefore have to be determined at the school level."

Source - WAMG 'Rarely Cover' Implementation Process Guidance April 2009

At the NGA conference in Leeds I used the issue of wall displays as an example of cases where governing bodies need to implement the workforce agreement with care and sensitivity. There has been much debate about teachers who take great pride in their classroom environment and who prefer to create their own displays, despite the fact that this work is supposed to be done by support staff. Our view is that sympathetic employers should recognise that reality, but make it clear that managers must not instruct any teacher to carry out administrative tasks.

In our view a responsible employer does not set out how a graduate professional should deal with a wall display. Nor should teachers be barred from using a photocopier. This does not detract from the workforce agreement, which the NGA supports, both in principle and in practice.

Phil Revell

Chief Executive

National Governors' Association