

Celebrating Service: A small thing to help teachers want to stay

By Ben Newmark

We are in a recruitment and retention crisis and it's getting worse.

Targets for new teachers look likely to be missed by substantial margins in almost all subjects at secondary. Primary doesn't look much better.

Fewer and fewer people want to be teachers. Relative pay has fallen, workload is high and the normalisation of working from home in other sectors makes the structure of teaching roles seem outdated.

Nobody seems to know what to do.

But one thing we, in schools, will have to accept, is that there won't be room for a 'shape up or ship out' ethos if teachers are unhappy. There won't be anyone to ship in!

So what to do?

Given all the inherent constraints on schools – the standardised pay, the inherent flexibility of the job – how much can schools actually do to improve things for teachers?

Teacher Tapp data shows there are things to be done, because there are many schools where teachers enjoy their work. There are schools they don't want to leave.

Hearteningly, our data shows it isn't about finding an easy place to work. Alternative Provision and Special Schools often have happy staff, and serving a disadvantaged community doesn't make teachers inherently unhappy and dissatisfied. In fact, some seek it out. ([We did a report on this in 2019](#))

We shouldn't be surprised by this. Because the data also suggests something rather wonderful about the people who choose to be teachers: What makes teachers happiest is when their pupils succeed.

To those of us who've been totally immersed in the teaching life for a long time this marvel may have been dulled by familiarity. But let's take a minute to look at it.

Despite what lazy journalists imply, teachers do not go into teaching for long holidays, the high pay or the high status (obviously!) They do not go into it because it's easy.

Instead, far more people choose teaching because [they care about what they teach and want to help others](#). They go into teaching because they enjoy spending time with children. Most people who choose teaching did so because they wanted to make a difference to pupils' lives.

There are implications in this for schools.

Like all people, teachers want to be valued for their work. For teachers this often means recognising them for what they do for others – and let them share that glory. Anyone who's ever been to an award ceremony for teachers will note that, almost invariably, winners point to how their success is really the success of their pupils and other colleagues.

However, this marvel of motivation also makes teachers vulnerable.

It makes them vulnerable to those who cynically take advantage and argue it means they don't need a fair wage. It makes them easy prey for bullying management practices that imply poor performance is 'letting others down', because they know it will hurt to hear it.

To make and keep teachers happy, schools must show they see and value what teachers are doing for others, especially when times are tough. They need to protect their teachers from people and events that knock their confidence and might make them feel they're failing. They must stop teachers feeling that what they are doing is pointless in the face of challenge.

Ceremonies of Celebration

At the school I work in, each Friday begins with a briefing in which senior leadership take time to thank teachers for specific things they have done for their pupils that week. Teachers are recognised for a wide range of things – from helping children get good grades to sensitively dealing with a serious disclosure.

Many schools do similar. But the importance of such ceremonies can be forgotten, especially when times are hard and finding things to celebrate feels a struggle. Sometimes they slip and are forgotten.

Don't let this happen. Recognise and publicly thank. Privately thank people. Find any way to show people you see what they're doing for others.

They notice when they are noticed. They notice when they are not.

Of course, recognising what teachers do for others doesn't mean they don't also need more money or time for their job. But it's quite clear in the data that teachers care deeply about this. A desire for recognition of what they do for others comes up again and again.

And I think it works. The school I'm teaching at is fully staffed for next year. So the big question is: Do staff at your school feel equally appreciated?

If you would like to learn more about whether your staff feel appreciated, check out [SchoolSurveys.com](https://schoolsveys.com) - our tool for checking how staff, pupils and parents feel about issues compared to national averages.

Ben Newmark is a practising history teacher and senior leader. He has been teaching for twenty years.