

Welsh Language Education: White paper consultation UNISON Cymru Wales response

About UNISON

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union organising and representing 1.3 million public sector workers UK wide, including 100,000 public sector workers across Wales.

UNISON Cymru Wales represents thousands of school support staff including teaching and learning support assistants, reception and office staff, kitchen and catering staff, midday supervisors, caretakers, pastoral care, technicians and librarians. These school staff are predominantly female. This submission is shaped by their experience.

UNISON Cymru Wales response

The Welsh Government is to be commended for actively promoting the Welsh language and encouraging its learning and UNISON Cymru Wales offers broad support for these initiatives. We recognise significant resources will be required to ensure we successfully meet the Cymraeg 2050 target.

Foremost amongst them, is the contribution of the whole school workforce towards Welsh language learning for future generations. UNISON's consultation response is chiefly concerned with emphasising how the full involvement of school support staff is crucial to the success of increased Welsh language provision.

It is the hard work and dedication of support staff that helps make our schools the success they are. Historically, school support staff have faced an institutional discrimination that belittles their vital role and excludes them from school planning. UNISON has long campaigned against this and there is evidence thinking is changing, at least at a Welsh Government level, if not in each school.

The full involvement of the entire workforce and their trade union representatives in the early planning around how the White Paper proposals may come into effect at a Wales national level as well as in each school, offers the opportunity to break decisively with this institutional discrimination.

It is essential for all staff to have the chance to access some Welsh language training, though of course, not all staff will need Welsh language skills to the same level.

In English medium schools, those support staff not in the classroom, the cooks and caterers, cleaners, midday supervisors, administrative and facilities staff and more, will not need the same level of Welsh language provision and support and training as teaching assistants, but it is important they feel valued and are not excluded. Speaking a few words of Welsh to students outside the classroom on school premises, in playgrounds or in canteens would help and encourage students in communities where English is the predominant language, to see Welsh as a live language and not solely something to be studied in textbooks.

Schools cannot survive without teaching assistants (TAs); they help to support pupils with Additional Educational Needs and those underperforming, help teachers to cope with big classes, release teachers for preparation time and help those with English as an Additional Language. The full engagement of TAs with these proposals is therefore essential.

However, traditionally training provision for teaching assistants has been poor and indeed many have been forced to pay for their own training, despite the fact it would benefit students and the school.

Employers must ensure appropriate backfill and release to support the implementation of any legislation. Training must be paid, in work time and staff released specifically for this. Language learning demands dedication and time and is not something that can be done on the odd training day here or there. To learn effectively, school staff would need to be released from normal duties regularly over a long-term period for the duration of the learning, perhaps for up to two years.

This is a huge undertaking and this level of release and cover must be properly funded and planned by schools, Councils and Welsh Government, with the involvement of staff and their trade unions. Undoubtedly, this demands a high investment, but if it is done correctly, it will pay off extraordinarily well.

Getting the level of support to TAs right is so important because TA recruitment is a huge issue. They are already very low paid for the job they do given their level of responsibility, and many could earn more in a supermarket. Adding a Welsh language standard is likely to make the job even less attractive to potential candidates and the existing workforce.

This is a workforce worn down by providing critical work through the pandemic supporting the children of key workers and yet receiving repeated low annual pay awards.

Despite taking on more responsibility with the introduction of the new curriculum and the Additional Learning Needs transformation programme, there has not been a recognition in respect of improved rates of pay.

We recognise the commitment of the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in allocating money for training to schools ring-fenced for TAs, however TAs feel that this funding does not always reach them. This is significant when we are talking about the importance of Welsh Language training for all staff.

The inclusion of unions in discussions about what Welsh language support and training is to be offered is a must. We need to understand the extent staff are expected to reach competencies in the Welsh language and that there will not be any repercussions/detriment or that this does not form part of capability in their career and that failure to obtain competencies would not result in dismissal. We need to know the support available for those who will or may struggle to get to appropriate levels because of disability, socio-economic disadvantage, digital exclusion or other factors.

People learn new skills at different speeds and account also must be given for those with learning difficulties. They are likely to need additional support and time.

Currently, not all support staff in Welsh medium schools speak Welsh or speak it fluently, even in communities where Welsh is most commonly used.

In further developing these proposals, we would urge Welsh Government to evaluate the extent these staff feel included and supported in their Welsh language learning.

It could also investigate whether there is currently uniformity across Wales in Welsh medium schools for the amount of paid time off provided to all school staff to learn the language.

If teaching assistants are required to read and write in Welsh to support students, this requires a higher degree of skill than just speaking Welsh. Even in Welsh speaking areas, it could actually mean TAs must have a greater knowledge than many they live alongside in the community.

Across schools, there are discrepancies around job descriptions for TAs; you can have the same job title doing very different duties, receiving vastly different pay across Wales. As there are no minimum set of qualifications for teaching assistants now, it would be perverse to set a compulsory level for Welsh understanding. This is wider strategy discussion for the profession and should be considered by the School Support Staff Workforce Board and the Welsh Government's TA minimum entry requirements group.

We note here the integrated impact assessment on changes to the Initial Teacher Education programme concluded its criteria will help realise Cymraeg 2050. It seems that planning has already started for new teachers to have received specific training in this area when they enter the profession; training and opportunities, that so far have not been scheduled for the teaching assistants who will be working alongside them.

It is important for language training to start as soon as possible in order to make sure the workforce feel skilled and equipped.

Quite understandably, school staff may be anxious about the proposals, and we recommend early and clear communication as key to tackling fear and providing assurance.