

Why pay bargaining for school support staff in Wales needs to change

Briefing for all Senedd Members, July 2025

Thousands of people in Wales working in schools supporting the education and welfare of children are very low paid and many are trapped in in-work poverty, forced to rely on benefits to make ends meet. The overwhelming majority are women.

Support staff would describe themselves as overstretched and underpaid. Part-time, casual and term time working, dominate. They lack a proper career structure with transparent fair pay and conditions, uniformly applied across the whole of Wales.

The UK government's creation of a School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) for England under the Employment Rights Bill, offers Wales the opportunity to consider how we might want to respond and how we might reward this workforce more fairly.

The Welsh Labour government's recent announcement committing to the creation of a SSSNB for Wales is very welcome and is the result of many months of concerted campaigning led by UNISON Cymru – the biggest union in schools. There is a great deal of work still to be done.

This paper discusses the vital role support staff plays in schools, why their pay bargaining needs to change, what UNISON Cymru is doing to shape a SSSNB for Wales and asks for your support in lifting support staff and their families out of poverty.

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Support staff are vital to our schools

Nearly 50,000 people are registered as school support staff with the Education Workforce Council.

They perform all the vital yet unheralded jobs in schools supporting children's education and wellbeing, including teaching assistants (TAs), cleaners, catering staff, lunchtime supervisors, admin staff, caretakers and more.

TAs help to support children with additional learning needs and those underperforming, help teachers to cope with big classes, release teachers for preparation and much more.

Very low pay can mean in-work poverty

Many school support staff earn the minimum wage. In UNISON's 2023 survey, one in six school support staff had used food banks in the past year. There is a school in Cardiff, Ty Gwyn, which operates a food bank just for its own staff.

In a separate UNISON Cymru 2023 survey, nearly 40% of school support staff are forced to take a second job to make ends meet, a breakfast club or the supermarket.

Since 2010 the pay of all council workers, including school staff has fallen by 25% in real terms, a result of pay freezes and pay caps during the severe spending cuts of austerity. When you are already low paid, that is going to have a significant impact.

Years of underfunding and low pay awards have created a TA recruitment and retention crisis. People decide the high responsibility is not worth the poor salary. Some Level 1 TAs can't get a loan for buying a car because their wages are so low. Work at the local supermarket proves an attractive option for some, offering higher wages and lower responsibility.

UNISON Cymru recently organised for school members to meet the Low Pay Commissioners in Swansea in May to discuss how, despite working as hard as they can, life is a struggle.

Scandal of term time only pay

Tackling the scandal of term time only pay must be a priority. School support staff are paid for term time only whilst heads and teachers are paid for their summer holidays. Support staff are only paid for the time they're in school – 9 months, but this is disguised by being spread out into 12 payments in the year.

During term time they work over their hours with after school clubs, and residential trips, late nights and early mornings for no extra pay. But that *is* factored into teachers' pay.

They are seen as professional enough to run a class but not valued enough to be paid for summer holidays like teachers.

They can't recoup holiday time back if they are ill or have an operation during the school holidays as you can in other sectors.

Registration as professionals

In Wales, school support staff must register with the professional body, the Education Workforce Council and a fee is attached. When this was first initiated it was sold to staff as a first step to professionalisation of their role, yet stuck on low pay and denied training opportunities, they are still not treated as professionals with fair rates of pay.

Limited access to training

Too many TAs are thrown in the deep end without proper professional development and left to get on with it. Some TAs are forced to pay for their own training. Unhelpful headteachers say 'we can't afford to send you on a course,' but these new skills are then utilised to support pupils and the teacher, so their school benefits directly. Support staff don't receive financial recognition for new skills learned and there are no opportunities for career progression.

Lack of appropriate training also impacts on quality of learning and appropriate support for ALN pupils.

They're always asked to go above and beyond by headteachers who say, 'We're a family.' Staff are pressured into doing yet more work like administering medicines, such as inserting catheters. That's not in their job description and they don't get any pay for it.

Some schools don't use Inset days to train TAs, denying them access to training opportunities you would expect staff should receive given they must register with a professional body.

These schools instead opt to save money by not employing TAs on those days. This has a further impact on low paid staff who might be struggling financially.

Fear of redundancy

Councils are in a dire financial situation after nearly 15 years of austerity and funding for schools is extremely stretched. Every year, TAs fear redundancy when the school budgets are announced. They're always the first to go and are not replaced so the skeleton team is stretched even further and remaining staff must do more with less.

What's happening across the border?

The UK Labour Government's Employment Rights Bill includes setting up a School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB), with the specific aim to improve pay and employment conditions so schools can recruit and retain the staff they need. The body is for school support staff in England, and it won't negotiate pay agreements until 2027/28 at the earliest.

At present, pay negotiations for all council employees in England and Wales, including school support staff, take place in the National Joint Council for local government services (NJC) in which UNISON and the other trade unions recognised for collective bargaining purposes (GMB and Unite) play a full role.

The School Support Staff Negotiating Body will take English school support staff out of the NJC.

A School Support Staff Negotiating Body for England was originally set up in 2009 but abolished shortly afterwards by the incoming Conservative-Lib Dem Government.

UNISON's consultation of school members

In January-February this year, UNISON Cymru undertook an extensive consultation of all our school staff members to see how they wished to respond.

We laid out the various options an expanded SSSNB covering England *and* Wales, a Wales only SSSNB, and remaining in the NJC. Our red lines were whatever the eventual body, UNISON must be able to collectively bargain for members and protecting the good work driven by UNISON Cymru working with Welsh government around improving access to training and career development.

There was a clear preference amongst members for a Wales only SSSNB – 51% ranked this as their top preference, 29% an expanded England and Wales SSSNB and 20% the status quote NJC.

What happens next?

It was heartening to hear the commitment made at Welsh Labour conference at the end of June for the creation of a SSSNB for Wales. This is one of UNISON's key demands ahead of the 2026 Senedd elections, but there is still much to be done to shape that body.

A Wales-only SSSNB could address the sector's low pay and weak employment conditions and UNISON is continuing to drive the agenda. We have commissioned the Labour Research Department (LRD) to investigate and report on what a School Support Staff Negotiating Body for Wales might look like. They will be examining:

- The current situation and needs of school support staff
- The case for change and why a SSSNB for Wales makes sense
- The cost of setting up such a body

LRD have already started gathering evidence and interviewing school support staff representatives, headteachers and policy officers, amongst others.

The report will be finished over the summer and the intention is to launch it at the Senedd and we would be pleased for you to be there. Further details to follow.

In the meantime, if you share our belief the best way to fairly reward school support staff, please get in touch a.gittins@unison.co.uk