

Revised professional standards for assisting teaching, teaching and leadership

Consultation response form

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Responses should be returned by 30 January 2026 to:

Professional Learning Branch
School Practitioner Division
Education, Culture and Welsh Language Group
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

or completed electronically and sent to:

email: ProfessionalStandardsReview@gov.wales

Summary of UNISON's position

UNISON Cymru represents thousands of school support staff and is the largest education union in Wales.

Teaching Assistants (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.

They are committed professionals dedicated to supporting children's learning and welfare. They want to be included in decisions about how the school is run. They want to contribute ideas and to have their voices heard. They are interested in their personal development to help them in their work and want easy access to training.

Sadly, the schools where support staff feel fully included and genuinely respected by senior leaders are in a minority and generally a culture of institutional discrimination against support staff exists.

Too many TAs are thrown in the deep end without proper professional development and left to get on with it.

Registration with the EWC comes with an expectation that TAs would be entitled to ongoing structured professional development and that they would be expected to participate in regular reflection and training to keep their skills relevant and up to date. This is not the experience of the majority of TAs.

The revised professional standards are broadly welcomed by UNISON. We share the belief behind this consultation for all school staff to be empowered to inspire learners too, but on their own, the revised standards will not tackle the prevailing culture that locks out support staff and inhibits their professional development.

A failure to invest in support staff ultimately means learners and schools do not benefit from the full potential of the whole school team.

Any proposals around the professionalisation of support staff cannot be divorced from considering the very low pay and weak employment conditions they must endure. The scandal of term-time only pay means many suffer in-work poverty. School support staff job descriptions can be vague. They are regularly doing tasks above their grade for no extra pay and fixed term contracts lead to job insecurity.

If we want an education system that delivers the best for young people, we need to ensure school support staff are treated and rewarded fairly.

We commissioned the Labour Research Department to investigate the working conditions of school support staff and a way forward for Welsh government. In this consultation response we quote from the eventual report, launched in December 2025, [Time to value school support staff: the case for a Wales negotiating body](#).

Consultation questions

Question 1a

Do you agree that the structure for the revised professional standards is clear and easy to understand?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

The language used throughout should be as clear and accessible as possible to ensure maximum engagement and benefit. Some questions are too wordy and hide the true meaning of what is being asked.

The list of questions is long and could be reduced. It should be made clear that individual staff members should only focus on a select handful of questions otherwise the task is too onerous.

Question 1b

Do you agree that the structure for the revised professional standards is relevant to current needs and practices?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
	X			

Supporting comments

The structure and questions are more relevant and inclusive than before. Teaching assistants are asked questions on their own terms, positively reinforcing the message they are professionals and should be treated as such by school senior leaders.

The current professional standards are not commonly used now by school leaders with their teaching assistants and where they are, they feel punitive (for not having done something), not developmental.

For the revised standards to be truly effective, we recommend senior leaders engagement with their whole staff team on the professional standards be inspected by Estyn.

Question 2a

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, linked questions and supporting descriptors are appropriate for teaching assistants?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

As indicated above, language should be as clear and accessible as possible.

Reflection must be demonstrated by teachers and is ingrained in them. However, analysing and reflecting on the questions might not be as straightforward for support staff because they operate in an environment where their professional development has generally never been taken seriously by school leaders. Some TAs will understand what is being asked of them straight away, others may initially struggle.

Feedback from a school piloting the revised professional standards offers a guide to how they should operate across Wales: time in the school day was allocated for teachers to sit with and guide teaching assistant colleagues through the teaching assistant questions before further time was allocated for the teaching assistant to speak about them with a senior leader.

The key question is whether support staff have time or are offered the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the questions. See answer for Q.4.

Question 2b

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, linked questions and supporting descriptors are appropriate for teachers?
(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 2c

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, linked questions and supporting descriptors are appropriate for in-school leaders?
(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 2d

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, linked questions and supporting descriptors are appropriate for headteachers?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 2e

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, linked questions and supporting descriptors are appropriate for system leaders?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 3a

Do you agree that the revised professional standards and supporting descriptors are appropriate for use in mandatory statutory induction (Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT))?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 3b

Do you agree that the revised professional standards and supporting descriptors are appropriate for use in the contexts of both validation and accreditation (for example TALP and NPQH)?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 4

Do you agree that the revised professional standards and supporting descriptors will facilitate informal developmental conversations?
(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

Welsh government's intention is for the professional standards questions to be used in professional development reviews and as a natural part of school life.

With regard to informal discussions, we would say this is highly unlikely to happen during the school day, and we would therefore question when support staff are supposed to reflect. Teachers have Planning, Preparation, and Assessment (PPA) time as a statutory entitlement. This doesn't exist for support staff who don't have opportunities for this type of conversation. It is very common for them not to sit down during the day or to take a breath, when sometimes there isn't even a break from work during designated 'breaktimes' (and some are not afforded a dinner break).

Classrooms are usually intensely busy places and unlikely to offer any opportunity for these conversations or reflection.

This means the only possible time for reflection would be outside of the school day and therefore unpaid. Whereas teachers are paid for an entire year, school support staff are already discriminated against by being paid term time only and now they would be asked to undertake something extra in their own time.

After work they are likely to be tired from the working day. The profession is so poorly paid, many have second jobs and might finish school to immediately go to that job.

The consultation states that every practitioner working in a school is entitled to a professional development review, at least annually. Historically, not all school support staff have benefited from this. Obviously, this is detrimental to their personal development and it also hampers the quality of assistance they want to provide to support children's education and welfare. We asked UNISON School Support Staff Forum members how often they had development reviews and responses were not satisfactory.

Common answers were they were held just a handful of times in the last 20 years of work. Others said they might be held annually or when senior leaders remember, but they were just tick box exercises or a formality, where nothing was acted on and it was not about personal progression. In one case a classroom observation of the support staff member lasting 20 minutes was followed up with a 3-line email of assessment.

In one school, annual development reviews were introduced only after a local UNISON school representative pushed for them. Those who received an annual review questioned what senior leaders did with the notes taken and complained they couldn't access the training course list to see what might be available, of interest and use, because that was controlled by the head/senior leader.

The sole positive response where development reviews were reported to be working successfully was in a school that was applying them more rigorously because they were part of the professional standards pilot.

If annual professional development reviews are not taking place or are not meaningful, and if there is no time for reflection or discussion during the working day, the professional standards questions are of very limited value for support staff.

If the support member is able to record information in their personal time, there was a frustration that there are three platforms to note their professional development. The consultation states that record keeping helpful but not mandatory. It's legitimate to ask

how will records be kept and will level of detail required be onerous for already support staff already overwhelmed with work?

Question 5a

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, supporting descriptors and linked questions are supportive and developmental?
(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

The crucial questions are:

- Will school staff be afforded the paid time to review, answer and reflect on the questions posed?
- Once that reflection has taken place and the support staff member suggests to fully benefit they would like to undertake training, will this be paid for and paid time off be provided?

Support staff have very limited access to training courses and don't benefit from the same opportunities as their teacher colleagues. Attendance is at the discretion of headteachers who may decide against releasing them. Unhelpful heads 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 often there are no opportunities for career progression.

Some TAs are forced to pay for their own training and UNISON has also stepped into the breach to provide professional development training courses, like behavioural management, outside of school hours and in weekends, to allow support staff to attend in their own time. Unlike other professions, this time cannot be claimed back.

Many schools don't use Inset days to train TAs, which are meant to be used for staff development. They are being denied access to training opportunities you would expect staff should receive given they must register with a professional body. In some cases, schools opt to save money by not employing TAs on those days.

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

Question 5b

Do you agree that the revised professional standards, supporting descriptors and linked questions promote a sense of professionalism?
(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

It is impossible to answer this question without reference to very poor treatment of school support staff. Quoting here from UNISON's commissioned report, [Time to value school support staff: the case for a Wales negotiating body](#).

“Progress towards professionalisation of school support staff roles has been slow, and support staff feel they have few progression pathways open to them. The problem of progression is linked to the question of access to training, inadequate job descriptions and insufficient funding. If staff have a high workload and schools are on a tight budget, then there will be a pressure to keep school support staff on lower level job descriptions and to put off making time for training opportunities.

“School support staff routinely face heavy workloads that require them to work overtime, generally without additional pay. During working time, staff are often expected to take on all kinds of tasks that go beyond their job description. As well as managing overwhelming workloads, teaching assistants are often employed at a lower level than reflected by their actual working responsibilities and capabilities.

“The new survey undertaken for this report found that the overwhelming majority of teaching assistants believe that they are employed at the wrong level. Overall, 65% of teaching assistants believe that they are employed at the wrong level, and the figure rises to 80% for Level 1 teaching assistants. The Workforce Group in the Schools Social Partnership Forum recommended that the Level 1 role should be phased out, since it does not reflect the role as it is actually performed, however local authorities have overwhelmingly decided not to adopt this recommendation.”

Nothing would go further in promoting a sense of professionalism, than treating support staff with the respect they deserve.

Question 6a

Do you agree that the revised professional standards and supporting descriptors will prompt professional conversations that will encourage a focus on the priorities for the education sector in Wales?

(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

The new professional standards, where used properly by school leaders, should encourage collaboration where support staff are invited to attend school meetings and contribute. As it stands, most school support staff feel they don't have a voice in their school and they are deterred from asking questions. There must be an onus on the school leadership team to promote inclusivity.

A glaring example of this is the resistance of heads to release TAs to attend Welsh government workshops on this consultation even when Welsh government offered to pay for the TAs to attend.

The professional standards ought to be mandatory to ensure that every school in Wales incorporates them equitably. Voluntary means schools would be able to pick and choose whether to properly engage all staff. It's about professional respect for colleagues and treating them fairly.

Addressing this historic culture is essential for the new standards to be fully utilised and a success.

Question 6b

Do you agree that the revised professional standards and supporting descriptors will enable the developing school improvement agenda?
(Insert an x under the relevant heading.)

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
				X

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 7

Are there any descriptors that are unclear, should be changed or are missing?

Supporting comments

We have already commented about the wording and number of questions.

A suggested new descriptor to all levels of the school team might be around how well they work as one team.

Question 8

What sort of support might be useful to enable the standards to be used effectively?

Supporting comments

A guarantee of the following:

- At least one meaningful performance development review for all school staff per year
- Access to training and development opportunities no less favourable to that of their teaching colleagues. Schools should be reminded of the National Professional Learning Entitlement for the development of TAs
- Paid time to review, answer and reflect on the questions posed and access to technology to record their reflections
- A strong recommendation from Welsh government that the school leadership teams fully involve support staff in the running of the school – involving them in strategic thinking discussions and decisions. The internal school culture must be inclusive and welcoming to support staff.
- To underline the importance of inclusivity in schools across Wales, adoption of the new standards should be mandatory and Estyn should inspect the engagement by senior leaders with all their staff on the professional standards questions.

Question 9

Are there other impacts of these proposals which you would like to share your views on?

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 10

What, in your opinion, would be the likely effects of the proposals on the Welsh language? We are particularly interested in any likely effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English.

Do you think that there are opportunities to promote any positive effects?
Do you think that there are opportunities to mitigate any adverse effects?

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 11

In your opinion, could the proposals be formulated or changed so as to:

- have positive effects or more positive effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English; or
- mitigate any negative effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English?

Supporting comments

N/A

Question 12

We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

Support staff feel undervalued for the work they do. They are overstretched and underpaid. The very low wages, precarious contracts and the scandal of term time only pay means many are forced to rely on food banks and benefits to make ends meet.

When talking about improving professional standards to better support children's learning and welfare, it is important to acknowledge staff must be fairly treated. Treating this workforce poorly inevitably impacts upon morale.

Anonymity

Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please insert an x here:

I would like to remain anonymous	<input type="checkbox"/>
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