

Preventing Stress in Teaching Ireland



The Preventing Stress in Teaching project aims to control the effects of work on health, in this case by identifying and advising on stress, and seeking to mitigate and eliminate this occupational work hazard.

The major enablers for the success of the Preventing Stress in Teaching WHP project were the two teachers' trade unions i.e. their executive staff and research officers. In addition, the project was designed to maximise the involvement of teaching staff and trade union members.

Background

The origins of this project can be traced back to 1991, when teaching trade unions in Ireland funded a major study of stress in the profession, undertaken by the Work Research Centre (WRC). This study, significant in itself for highlighting the negative repercussions of occupational stress, has also provided an initial grounding for the current WHP project i.e. it represented an extremely thorough needs assessment, which has identified action priorities in the area of stress prevention.

Working conditions conducive to good health

The first step for the pilot phase of the programme was the selection of schools that would participate in the project. Four schools were selected, paying due attention to all relevant factors. Thus their

resources and funding varied from publicly funded schools (directly from the Department of Education) to privately funded (so called "fee-paying" schools). Attention was also paid to their location (e.g. rural versus urban, big city versus town), size (schools varied in size, from 18 employees to 60 employees) and the socio-economic background of students. In the Irish context, there is another interesting typology of schools, which are divided in terms of their background on denominational (secular) and religious schools. In addition, pupils' gender can be another cleavage, with religious schools tending (this was particularly the case in the past) to be "all-boys" or "all girls" schools. Of course, the willingness and commitment to participate in the work of the project were crucial selection criteria for these schools and their teachers.

Once instituted, it was envisaged that an effective stress prevention programme would yield the following benefits:

- n Improvement in teachers' health and job satisfaction
- n Development of a stress prevention policy
- n Improvement of the social climate in the school
- n Improvement in the quality of teaching

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- n Improvement in absenteeism rates
- n Improvement in the general work environment
- n Improvement in the problem solving capacity of each individual school
- n Establishment of a continuous process of stress prevention.

These objectives were to be achieved using a methodology which would only require a minimal outside assistance.

Establishment of co-operation and communication structures

The project preparatory phase included building a network of people and organisations with an interest and stake in the health improvement process in teaching. This step resulted in insurance companies coming on board, offering funding, as well as their political support. Another integral part of this process was to raise awareness regarding the rationale and relevance of stress prevention with regard to health improvement. Finally, an important feature of the project was the continued support extended to the participating schools and their teachers throughout the duration of the project, culminating in training sessions for teachers in order to equip them with the “know-how” required for the running of the project.

Developing successful strategies

The Preventing Stress in Teaching project illustrates how a workplace health promotion project can attract interest and support from commercial agents. Another successful feature of the project was the availability of support structures for teachers, such as training and general support throughout the pilot phase being extended by the WRC. Furthermore, the sense of ownership over the project by the participants has been maximised because teachers have been actively involved and consulted throughout all relevant phases of the project. Crucially, teachers themselves will now entirely take over the running of the project. One measure currently being implemented is the formation of a panel of trainers to help facilitate nationwide adoption of the stress prevention methodology. This is the ultimate step towards a comprehensive application of the methodology and, subsequently, wide-scale institution of the stress prevention policy.

Results

Though no formal assessment was undertaken, anecdotal evidence suggests that satisfaction levels were high and that the measures implemented during the stress prevention project were effective. All of the participating schools indicated that they had received benefit

from the project and that they would be willing to undertake similar measures in the future. In general terms, teachers found the methodology to be very useful in raising and addressing workplace stress issues.

Teachers’ satisfaction has been increased (this data relates to the four Irish schools where the project was piloted), not least because one of the most pressing issues for them has been tackled in a comprehensive manner. Limited tracking of the progress of stress prevention plans also took place, and it appeared that the actions taken were both feasible and effective.

Future perspective and commitment

As far as the future of the project is concerned, the efforts that have been made in this regard are beginning to produce the desired results. Sustainability of the project has been ensured by the effective take-over of the project by teachers themselves. The design of the methodology was sensitive to participants’ empowerment, and there is a scope for participants to design the best solutions for their own schools. This in turn should have a positive impact on the future commitments to the project.