

Browne Jacobson's school leaders survey illustrates rising volume of parental complaints and impact on teachers

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Two-thirds (65%) of school leaders say parental complaints have increased during the 2023/24 academic year in a new survey by UK and Ireland law firm Browne Jacobson.

Thirty percent reported a 'substantial rise' in the volume of complaints, while seven in 10 (71%) believe parents and carers are quicker to escalate concerns to the formal stage of the complaints process.

Nine in 10 (90%) believe complaints-handling is having a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing, with other knock-on effects cited including the quality of education being delivered (53%) and staff retention (48%).

The data from Browne Jacobson's [School Leaders Survey for spring 2024](#) – which was completed by more than 200 leaders of academies and multi-academy trusts, representing an estimated* 1,800 schools collectively responsible for nearly a million pupils across England – shines a spotlight on an issue that has risen up the agenda since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Findings also highlighted tools that could help schools better manage complaints, ranging from enhanced guidance and powers for dealing with unreasonable behaviour among parents through to proactive measures such as training and introducing complaints procedures.

Victoria Hatton, Senior Associate at Browne Jacobson, which delivers legal and HR services to education clients, said: "The message is clear – the rise in the number of parent and carer complaints, and the handling of vexatious complaints and unreasonable parent behaviour, is having a direct negative impact on staff wellbeing, staff retention, and the quality of education staff are able to deliver.

"While clearer guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) on complaints would no doubt assist, school leaders need to do more to understand the root causes of these issues within their schools and academy trust communities, and be proactive in initiating change from within."

What concerns are parental complaints addressing?

The top three issues raised as subjects of complaint from parents and carers during this academic year are support for pupils with special educational needs (SEND) (20%), behaviour and discipline (20%), and equality, discrimination and transgender issues (12%).

Parental responsibility (10%) and safeguarding (7%) were also mentioned as common subjects of complaints.

School leaders were also asked about the types of behaviour they regard as 'vexatious' following reports by trade unions including the Confederation of School Trusts and NAHT about the burden these are placing on staff.

Common behaviours cited by survey respondents included personal attacks or aggressive behaviour towards staff (68%), sending excessive, lengthy or overly complex emails (65%), raising multiple complaints about the same issue (55%), insistence on unrealistic outcomes (54%), and discussing their complaints with others on social media (51%).

Over half of respondents strongly agreed there is a real burden being caused by parents and carers submitting complaints to multiple agencies, such as local authorities, MPs, Ofsted and the DfE while the internal school complaints procedure is ongoing.

Sixty percent of leaders rated the scale of the burden that complaints management is placing on schools at seven or higher out of 10.

One schools business partner from the East Midlands observed that the need to complain “has significantly increased since Covid – school staff are too easily accessible now and parents demand attention immediately”.

A headteacher from the Humber spoke of parents having “unrealistic expectations from state schools under pressure to meet higher level of need across the board”, while a trust CEO in the North East highlighted “completely unrealistic outcomes” as suggested resolutions by parents, such as sacking members of staff.

“Complaints are often escalated to Ofsted before we’ve completed investigations and in some cases before we’ve even received the complaint,” said the CEO.

“Many parents become aggressive when impartial investigations produce outcomes which reject their complaints. All of this is very draining on senior staff and complaints are more personalised than ever, impacting on the wellbeing of school leaders and I’m sure a significant factor in decisions to retire early or leave the profession.”

Solutions to parental complaints issue for schools

More than half (54%) of respondents want clearer DfE guidance on the difference between vexatious complaints and unreasonable parent behaviour, and how to handle them, believing this would help to reduce the negative impact of complaints.

Proactive steps taken by schools include training for school leaders (51%), trustees and governor (43%) and classroom staff (26%).

While capacity to manage complaints has been addressed in some cases, with a quarter of respondents (26%) reallocating staff time to manage investigations and 18% appointing a complaints co-ordinator, only 39% have introduced a new complaints procedure.

Some innovative solutions being explored include the introduction of parental helpdesk technology and the use of an artificial intelligence-powered parental complaints portal to de-escalate complaints.

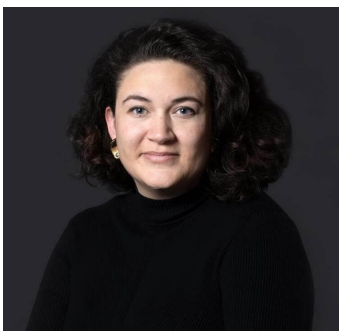
Nick MacKenzie, Partner in the education team at Browne Jacobson, added: “As school leaders and teachers increasingly divert their time, energy and resources away from their primary function of advancing education to deal with parental complaints, it’s clear that solutions are needed to a growing problem.

“Schools need clear evidence-based guidance from policymakers to ensure they can comply with their legal obligations and feel confident in their decision-making.

“For their own part, they should be reviewing internal complaints procedures, staff training and communication practices with parents to ensure they can adopt a proactive approach to complaints management.

“This can help to de-escalate concerns raised by parents and carers from progressing into formal complaints, as well as build better relationships between schools, families and their wider communities.”

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