International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The 2021 Report
By Dr Helen Kelly

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Introduction

This report summarises the results of the most in depth research into the wellbeing of international school teachers during the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020-2021. The research was conducted by Dr Helen Kelly, former school principal and independent researcher, writer, speaker and consultant on school wellbeing.

How has the work of international school teachers changed during the pandemic? How has this impacted on their stress levels and wellbeing? How are teachers coping with such a significant change to their professional and personal lives? What levels and what kinds of support are they receiving? Is this support enough? What support would they like to receive? This study provides a snapshot of the experiences of international school teachers from around the world.

The research aims to investigate the impact of the crisis on individual teachers and identify common themes so that we can better understand the challenges that teachers are facing and consider how these may be addressed during the remainder of the crisis and beyond.

An internet survey was used for data collection. A 66 question questionnaire was distributed via international school groups on a variety of social media platforms. This approach has an inherent bias in that only teachers who wanted to complete it are represented. This should be borne in mind when reading the report.

Summary

The findings suggest a high level of work-related stress among international school teachers during the pandemic. For most, this stress is caused by increased workload; the demands of implementing online and blended learning models; the blurring of boundaries between home and work; the pressure of demands and expectations placed on teachers by school leaders and parents; the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and the constant changes to their work that accompany the rise and fall of COVID transmission rates and the lack of support they are receiving. For some, there have been other factors that have contributed to their stress levels such as changes to their terms and conditions of employment and the isolation from friends and family in their home countries.

The findings suggest that increased stress has had a significant impact on the professional and personal lives of teachers. Many have felt overwhelmed and some have experienced symptoms of poor mental health or the exacerbation or onset of a diagnosed mental health condition. Most teachers have implemented coping strategies but for some these strategies have had a limited impact on their overall wellbeing. Fifteen months from the start of the pandemic, levels of wellbeing are generally low.

The finding show that teachers have felt inadequately supported by their schools. Many have considered leaving their school, the international school sector or the teaching profession.

Research Process and Participants

Methodology

An online, anonymous survey was posted on international school teacher groups on LinkedIn (9 groups) and Facebook (6 groups) in January 2021. These groups have a combined membership of over 300,000 educators worldwide.

275 teachers completed the 66 question survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data was analysed and a thematic analysis conducted of qualitative data.

Who Are the Participants?

How Long Have Participants Been Teaching?

Legend:
- This is my first year
- 1-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8-12 years
- More than 12 years

64.6%
26.4%

How Long Have Participants Been At Their Current School?

Legend:
- This is my first year
- 1-3 years
- 4-7 years
- 8-12 years
- More than 12 years

24.3%
15.7%
16.5%
38%

How Long Have Participants Worked in the International School Sector?

- ● This is my first year
- ● 1-3 years
- ● 4-7 years
- ● 8-12 years
- ● More than 12 years

34.8%
9.5%
23.3%
31.2%

How Long Have Participants Lived in Their Current Country of Residence?

- ● This is my first year
- ● 1-3 years
- ● 4-7 years
- ● 8-12 years
- ● More than 12 years

16.5%
18.1%
21.3%
12.9%
31.3%

Current Pandemic Living Conditions of Participants

- In a full lockdown/stay at home situation
- Living under major restrictions that do not amount to lockdown/stay at home
- Living under minor restrictions
- Living with no restrictions

Location of Participants

Quantitative Findings

General Overview

International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Crisis 2020-21

Since the start of the pandemic
My workload has increased **77%**
My work-related stress levels have increased **80%**

30% of respondents say they are getting enough practical support
22% of respondents say they are getting enough emotional support
29% of respondents say they are getting enough sleep

I have received enough support from other teachers **59%**
I have received enough support from senior leadership **22%**

Work with these groups has been more stressful during the pandemic %
(bar chart: Students, Parents, Teachers, Senior Leaders, Middle Leaders)

There are times in 2020 when I have come close to breaking point **61%**
I have felt lonely and isolated at times **66%**

My current work-related stress levels have impacted negatively on my
personal life **62%**
ability to do my job well **45%**
health **57%**

Symptoms of Poor Mental Health %
(bar chart: Anxiety, Depression, Panic Attacks, Overwhelmed, Exhausted, Frequent Sadness, Mood Swings)

I have had concerns about the wellbeing of a colleague this year **85%**
I have had enough guidance from my school about mental health and wellbeing **23%**
I have taken time off work with stress or mental ill health this year **23%**

I feel safe and supported in the country where I am living **53%**

51% have considered leaving their school because of the pandemic
32% have considered leaving the international school sector because of the pandemic
31% have considered leaving the teaching profession because of the pandemic

My workplace culture has had a positive effect on my wellbeing **20%**

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Overview of Teacher Support Needs

International School Teacher Wellbeing
During the COVID-19 Crisis 2020-21
Teacher Support Needs

I have received enough support from other teachers
59%

I have received enough support from senior leadership
22%

I have received enough support from middle leadership
29%

I have received enough support from school counsellors
24%

30% of respondents say they are getting enough practical support

22% of respondents say they are getting enough emotional support

I have had enough guidance from my school about mental health and wellbeing
23%

My school is doing its best to support my wellbeing
45%

Most common forms of support offered by schools

51% information from school about how to manage my wellbeing

40% group/whole staff sessions on mental health and wellbeing

21% one to one discussion with a middle/ senior leader about my wellbeing

I would like to receive the following support from my school

74% wellness days or part days built into the weekly or monthly schedule

55% adjustments to working hours or other working conditions

53% mental health leave offered by my school

38% psychological services/counselling paid for by school

36% the opportunity to develop a personal Wellbeing Action Plan

32% one to one discussion with middle/senior leader about my wellbeing

30% group or whole staff sessions on mental health and wellbeing

30% wellbeing focused PD to work through in my own time

27% one to one discussion with school counsellor about my wellbeing

20% information from school about how to manage my wellbeing

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Breakdown of Quantitative Findings

Responses use a five-point Likert Scale

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree
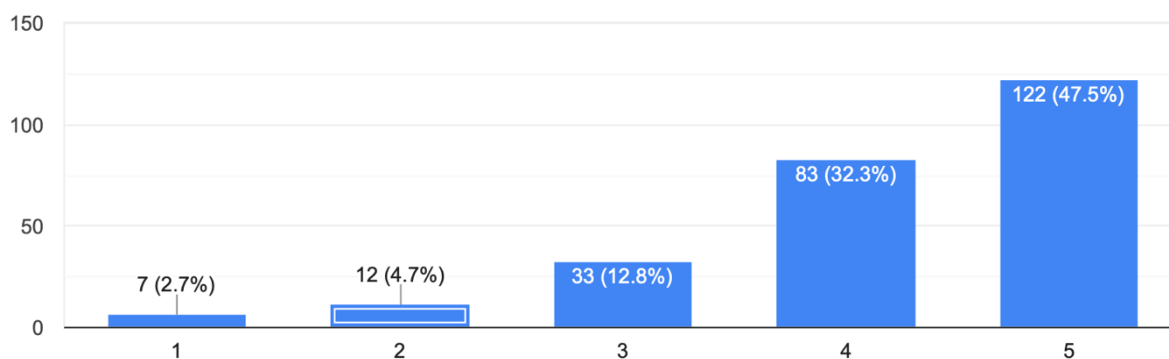
Section 1. Stress and Workload During the Pandemic
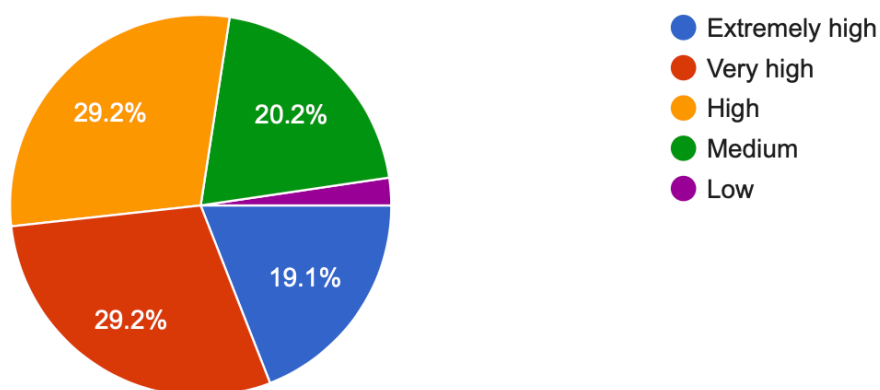
My workload has increased during the pandemic
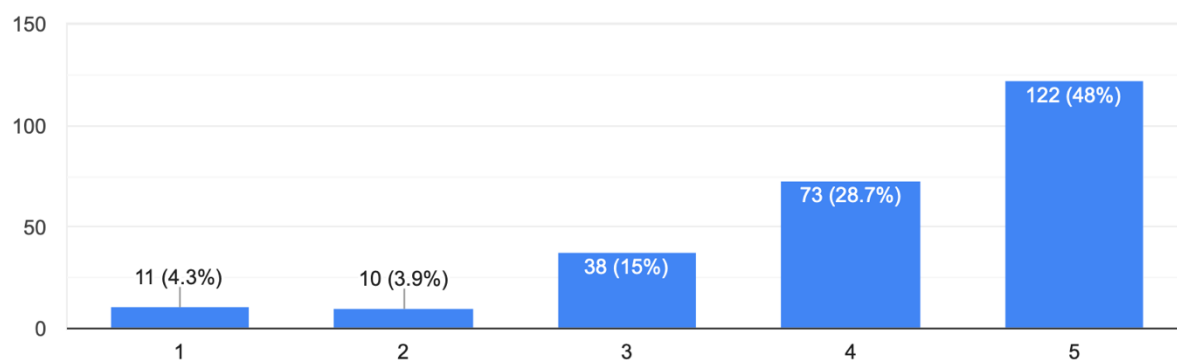
During the pandemic I have been working the following number of hours on average each week
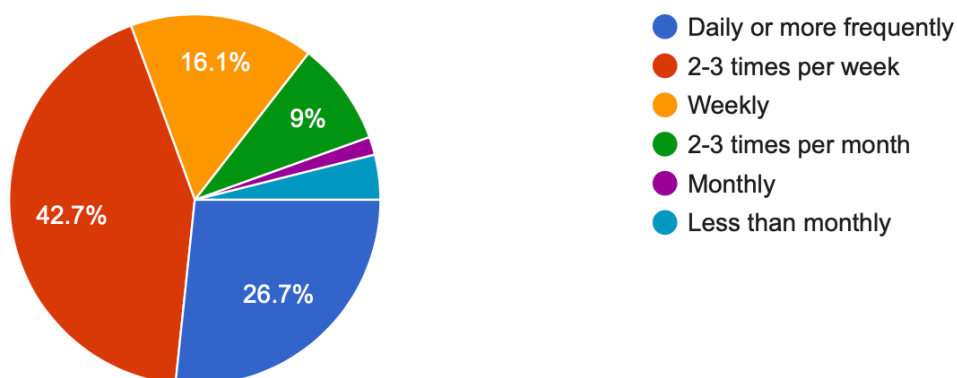

International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic The 2021 Report
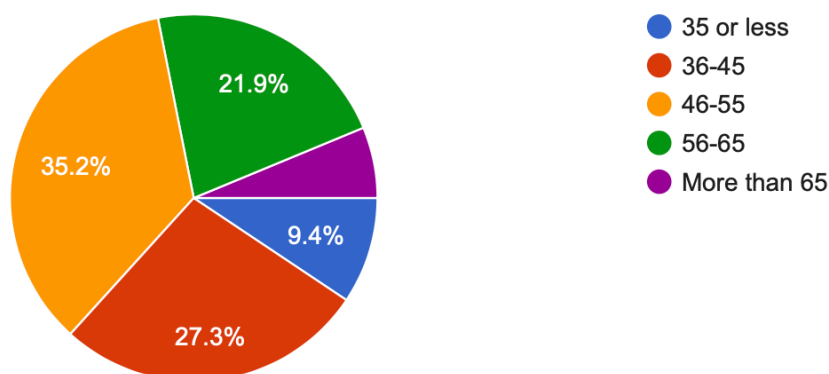
My work-related stress levels have increased since the start of the pandemic

During the pandemic my average stress levels have been

- Extremely high
- Very high
- High
- Medium
- Low

I have encountered stressful events or situations related to my work

- Daily or more frequently
- 2-3 times per week
- Weekly
- 2-3 times per month
- Monthly
- Less than monthly

During the pandemic working with students has been more stressful than usual
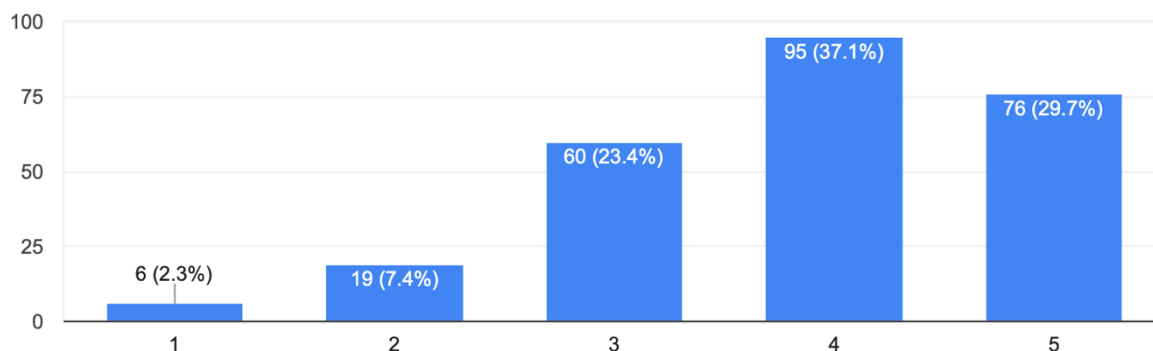
During the pandemic working with parents has been more stressful than usual
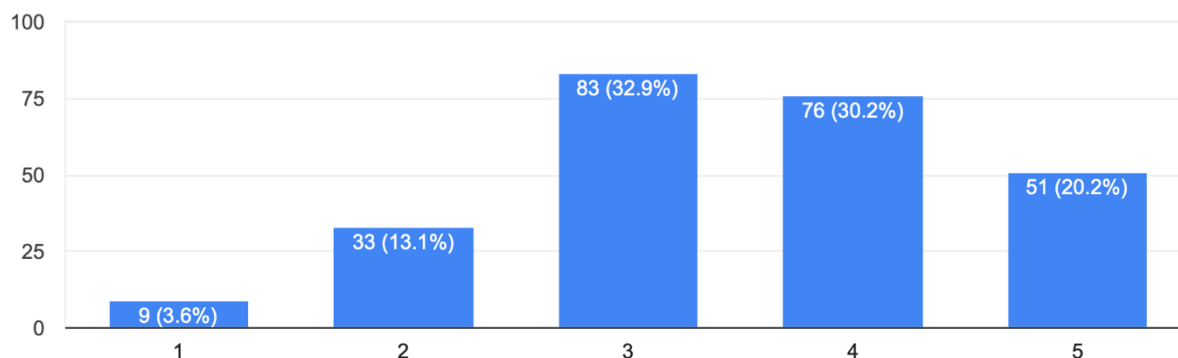
During the pandemic working with other teachers has been more stressful than usual

International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic The 2021 Report
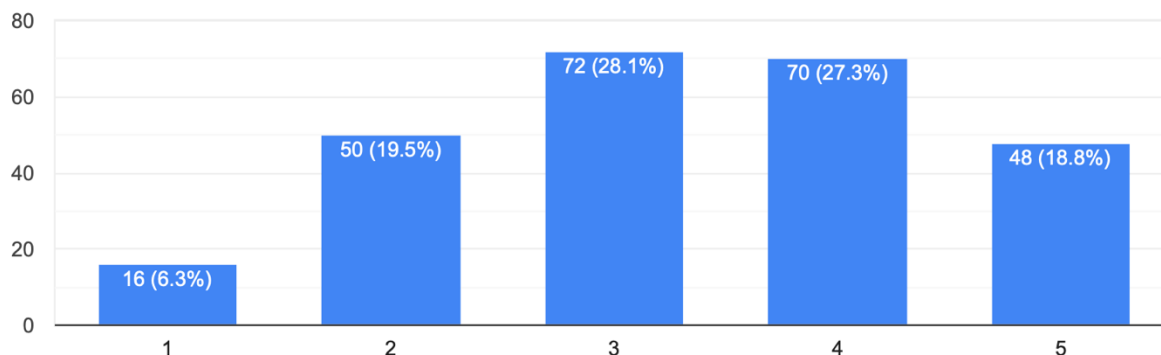
During the pandemic working with teaching assistants has been more stressful than usual

35 (15.2%) 51 (22.1%) 91 (39.4%) 38 (16.5%) 16 (6.9%)
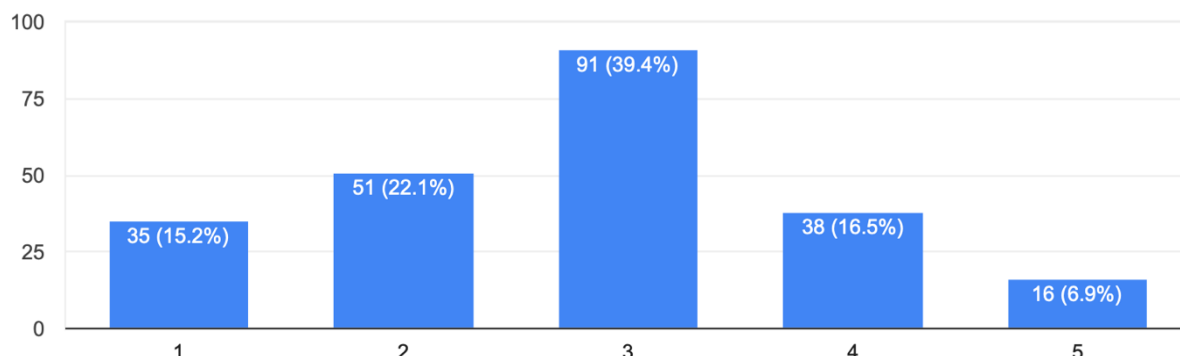
During the pandemic working with ancillary and administration staff has been more stressful than usual

30 (11.9%) 52 (20.6%) 74 (29.2%) 56 (22.1%) 41 (16.2%)
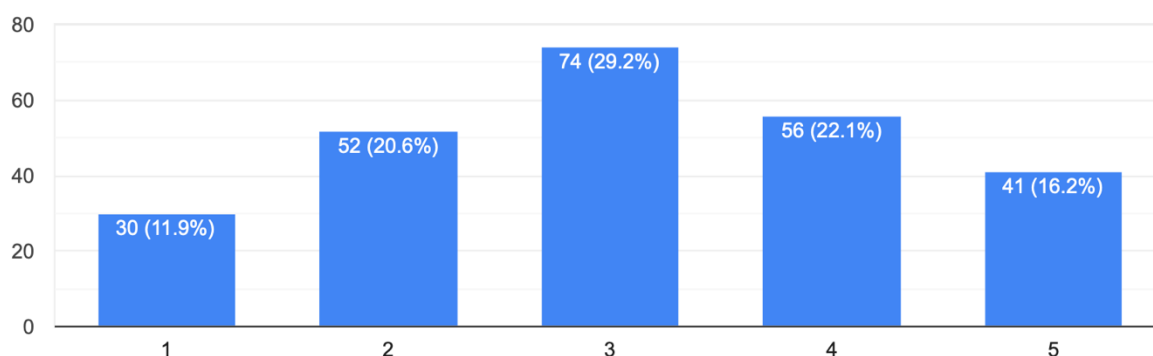
During the pandemic working with middle leadership has been more stressful than usual

21 (8.5%) 44 (17.8%) 75 (30.4%) 66 (26.7%) 41 (16.6%)

International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic The 2021 Report
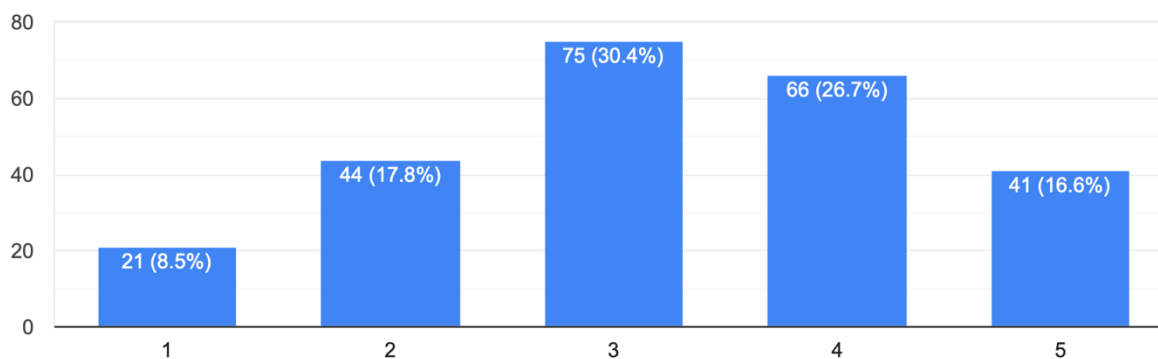
During the pandemic working with senior leadership has been more stressful than usual
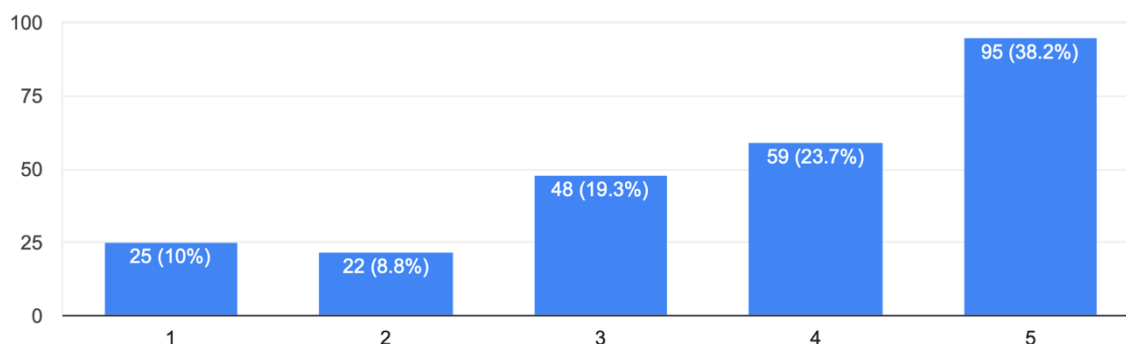
"*The amount of micromanagement from leadership made things much worse. Changing expectations and piling on the workload on a whim and then sending angry emails at all hours, making us feel constantly as if we are doing a bad job when we are really trying our best.*"
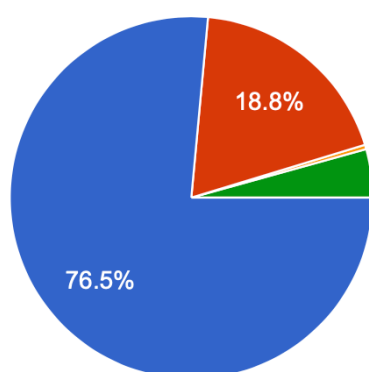
I have found the following mode the most challenging to implement
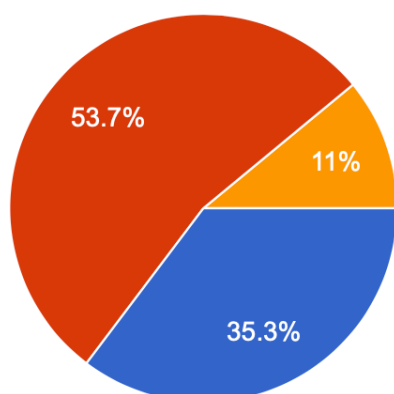
Online or distance learning
Blended online and face-to face
Bringing students back to school for face-to-face learning

53.7%
11%
35.3%

Section 2. Terms and Conditions of Employment

Has your salary changed because of the pandemic?

No, my salary has remained in line with normal expectations
I have lost pay but I am working as normal
I have been furloughed as a result of the pandemic
I lost my job as a result of the pandemic

18.8%
76.5%

Has your holiday entitlement changes as a result of the pandemic?

- No, my holidays have stayed the same
- Yes, my holidays have been reduced
- The number of holidays has stayed the same but the dates have changed
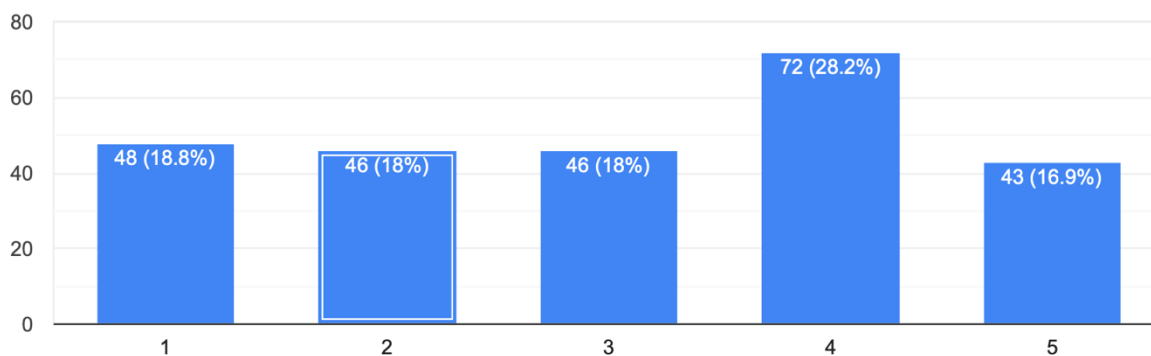
"As students return to the classrooms, we have been told that we should be grateful that we have a job and that additional hours in the evenings, weekends and holidays will be an expectation."

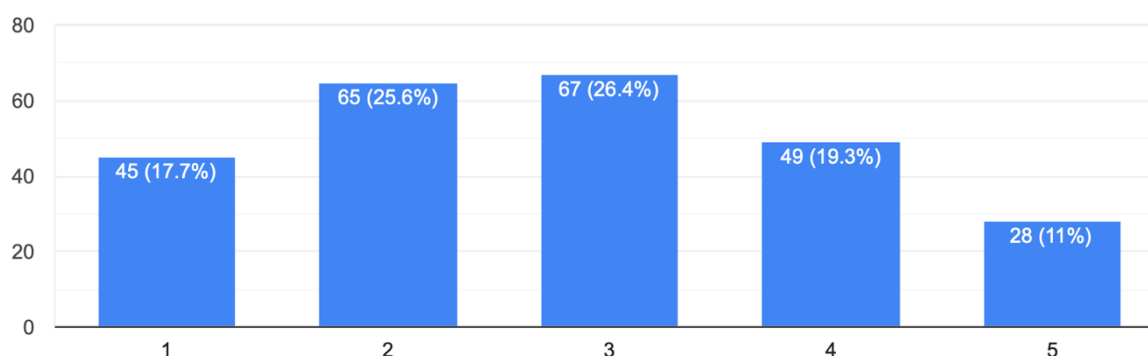## *Has your entitlement to your gratuity/bonus changed as a result of the pandemic?*

- 🔵 No, my gratuity/bonus has stayed the same
- 🔴 Yes, my gratuity/bonus has been reduced
- 🟠 Yes, my gratuity/bonus has been increased

22.4%

76%
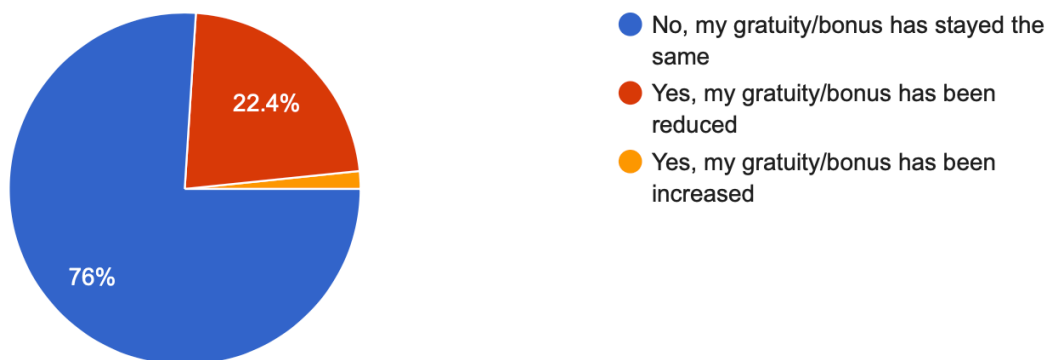
Section 3. Support and Workplace Culture

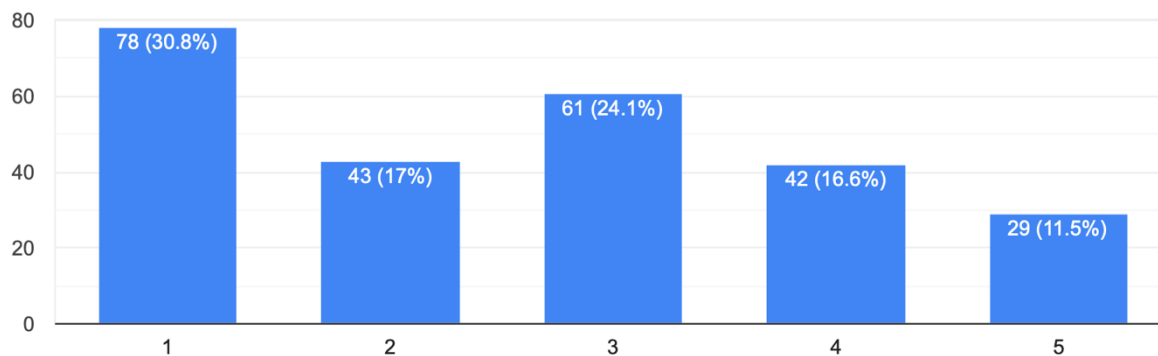### *The school has done its best to support me during the pandemic*

Chart showing responses on a scale of 1 to 5:
- 1: 48 (18.8%)
- 2: 46 (18%)
- 3: 46 (18%)
- 4: 72 (28.2%)
- 5: 43 (16.9%)

I have received enough practical support at school during the pandemic

Chart showing responses on a scale of 1 to 5:
- 1: 45 (17.7%)
- 2: 65 (25.6%)
- 3: 67 (26.4%)
- 4: 49 (19.3%)
- 5: 28 (11%)

I have received enough emotional support at school during the pandemic

Chart showing responses on a scale of 1 to 5:
- 1: 90 (35.6%)
- 2: 54 (21.3%)
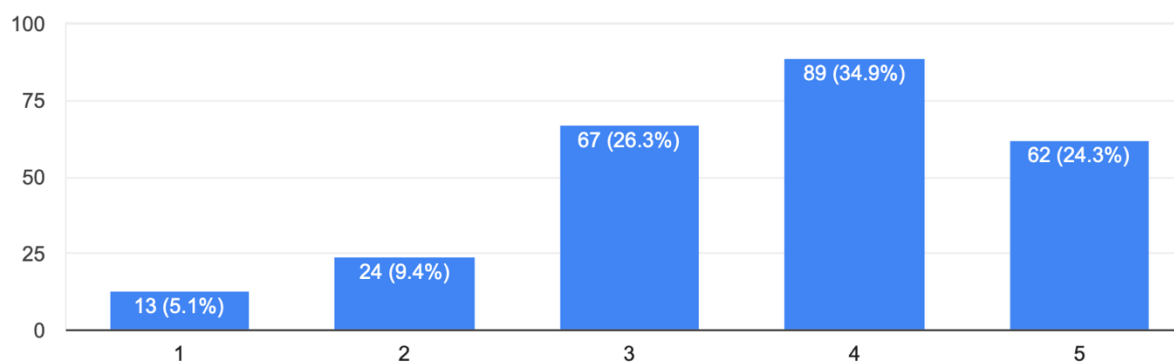- 3: 53 (20.9%)
- 4: 38 (15%)
- 5: 18 (7.1%)
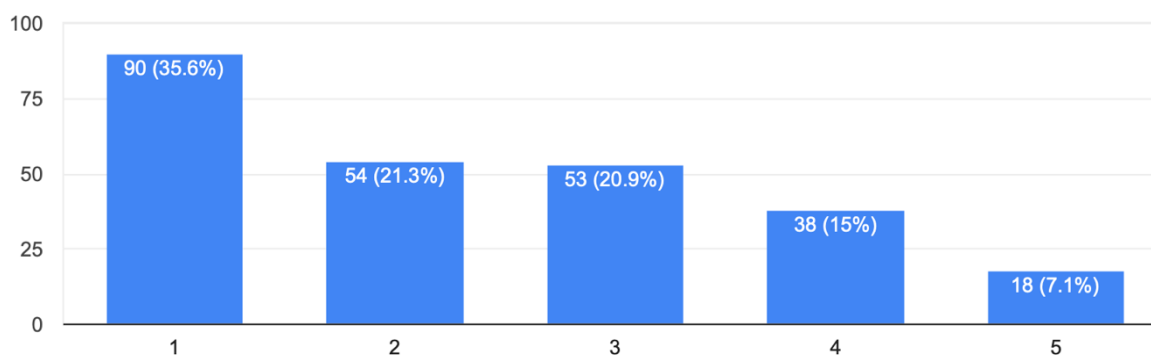
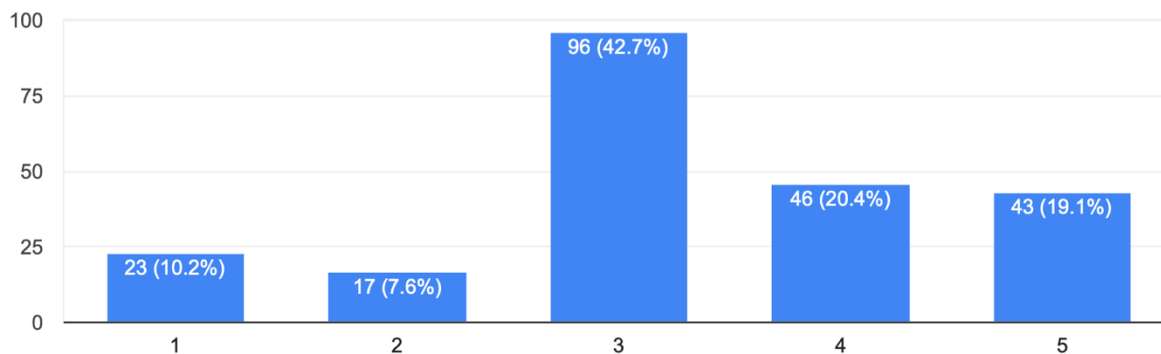## *I have received enough support from senior leadership*

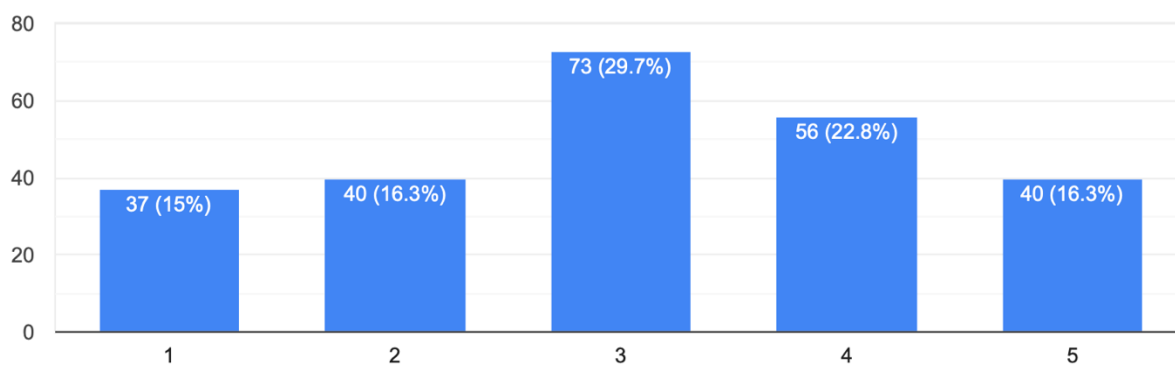## *I have received enough support from middle leadership*
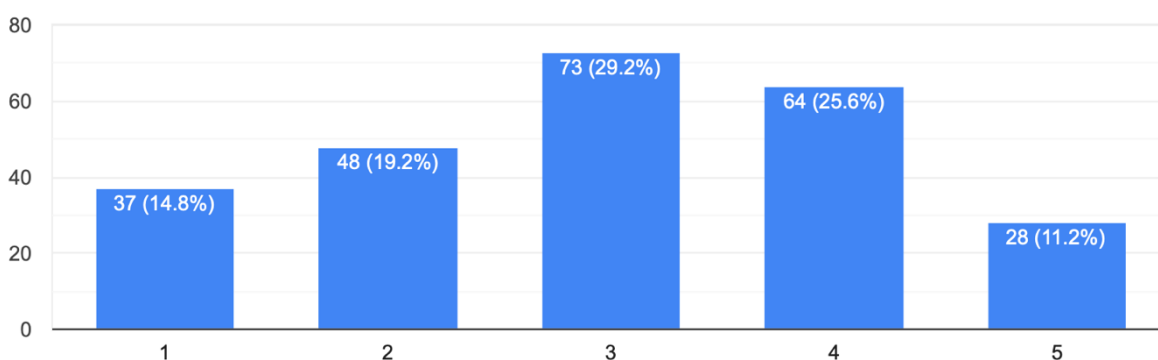
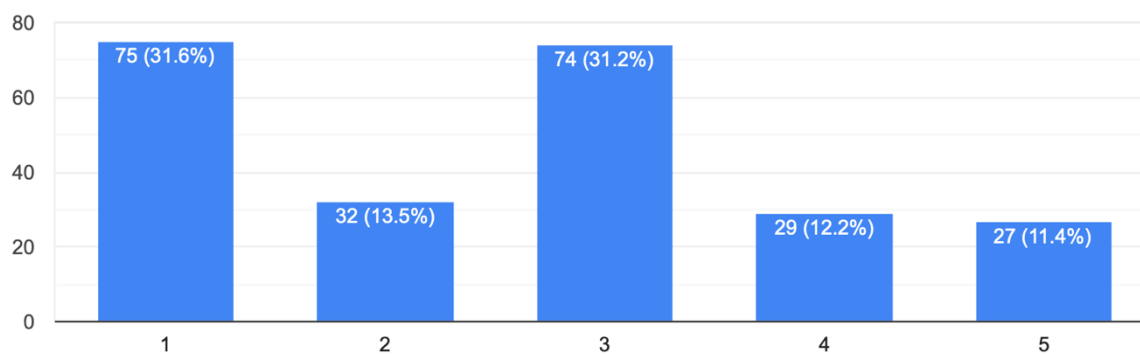## *I have received enough support from other teachers*

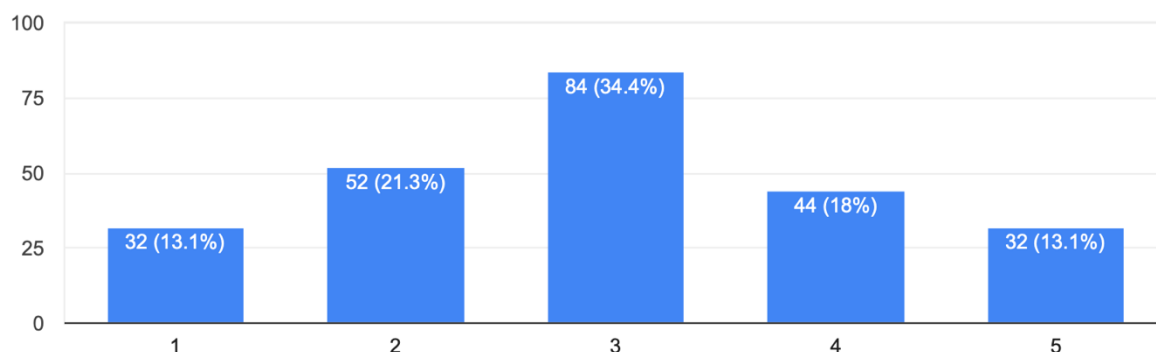## *I have received enough support from teaching assistants*

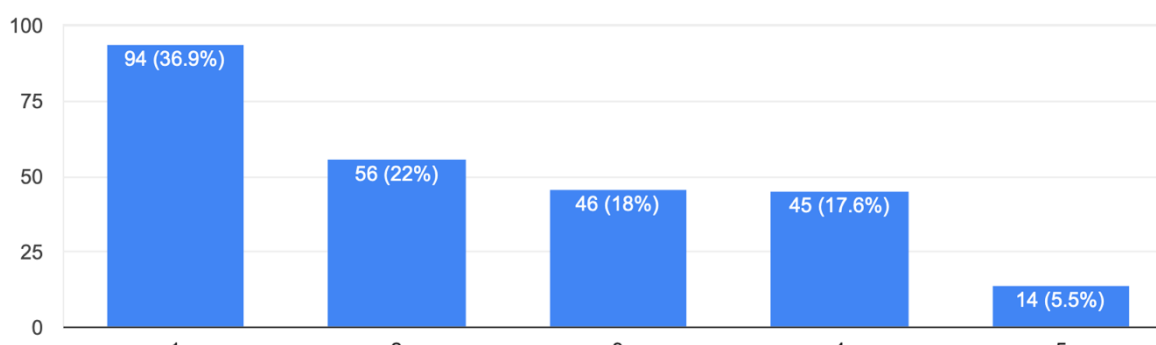## *I have received enough support from administration and ancillary staff*

I have received enough support from school counsellors

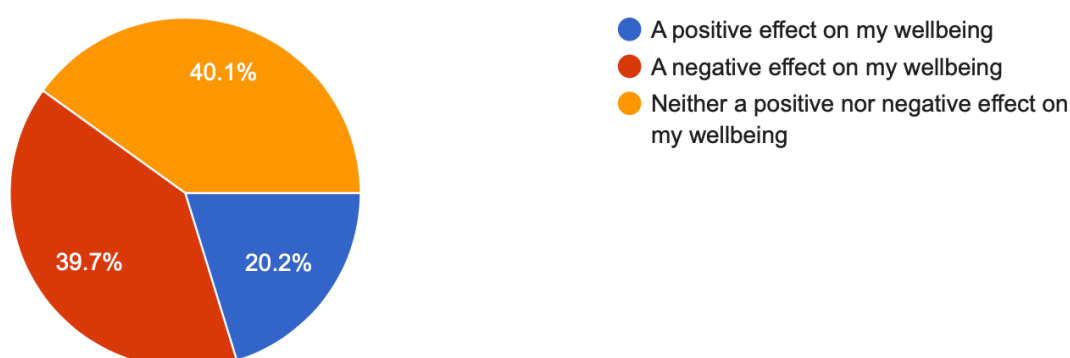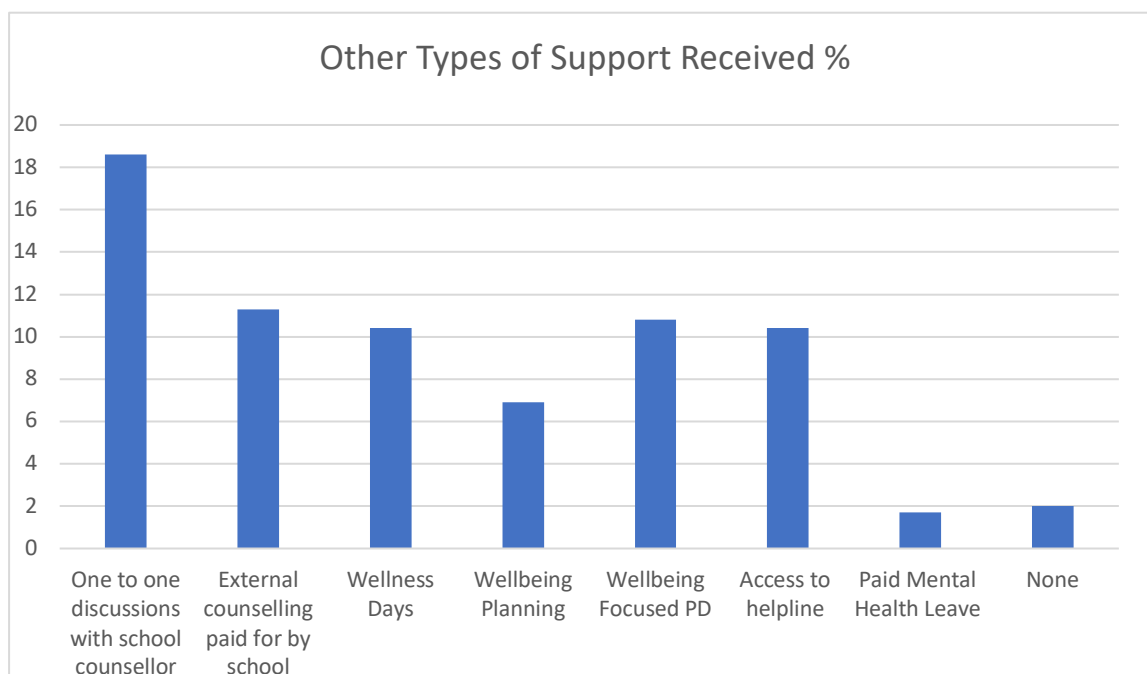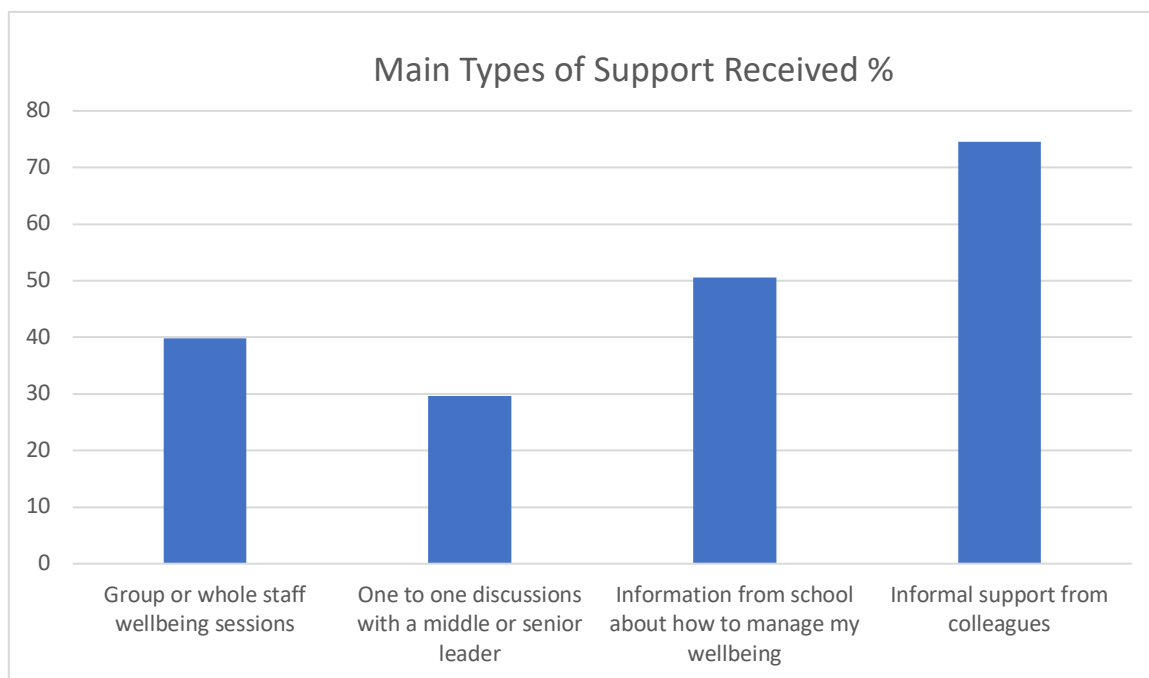## *I have received enough support from parents*

I have had enough guidance from my school about mental health and wellbeing

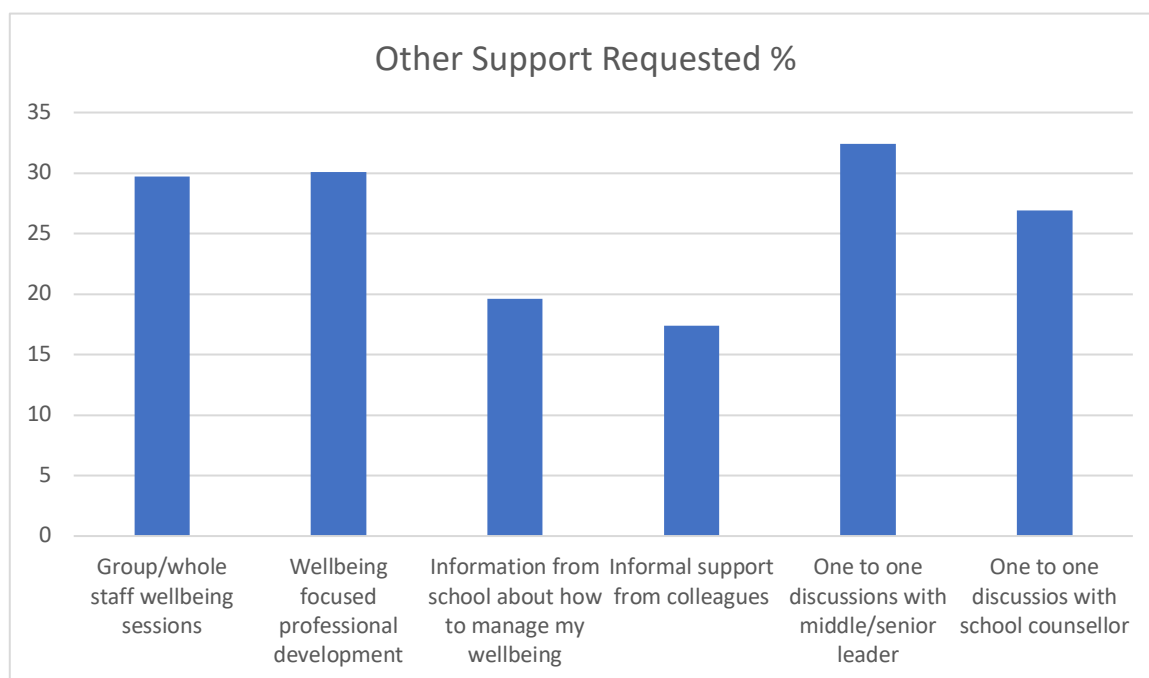## *The workplace culture at my school has had*

- A positive effect on my wellbeing
- A negative effect on my wellbeing
- Neither a positive nor negative effect on my wellbeing

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I have received the following support from my school

Main Types of Support Received %

Category	%
Group or whole staff wellbeing sessions	~40
One to one discussions with a middle or senior leader	~30
Information from school about how to manage my wellbeing	~51
Informal support from colleagues	~74

Other Types of Support Received %

Category	%
One to one discussions with school counsellor	~18.5
External counselling paid for by school	~11
Wellness Days	~10.5
Wellbeing Planning	~7
Wellbeing Focused PD	~11
Access to helpline	~10.5
Paid Mental Health Leave	~2
None	~2

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I would like to receive the following support from my school

Most Requested Support %

Wellness Days built into the weekly/monthly schedule — ~74
Adjustments to my working hours/conditions — ~55
Paid mental health leave — ~52
External counselling paid for by school — ~38
Personal Welbeing Planning — ~36

Other Support Requested %

Group/whole staff wellbeing sessions — ~29.5
Wellbeing focused professional development — ~30
Information from school about how to manage my wellbeing — ~19.5
Informal support from colleagues — ~17.5
One to one discussions with middle/senior leader — ~32.5
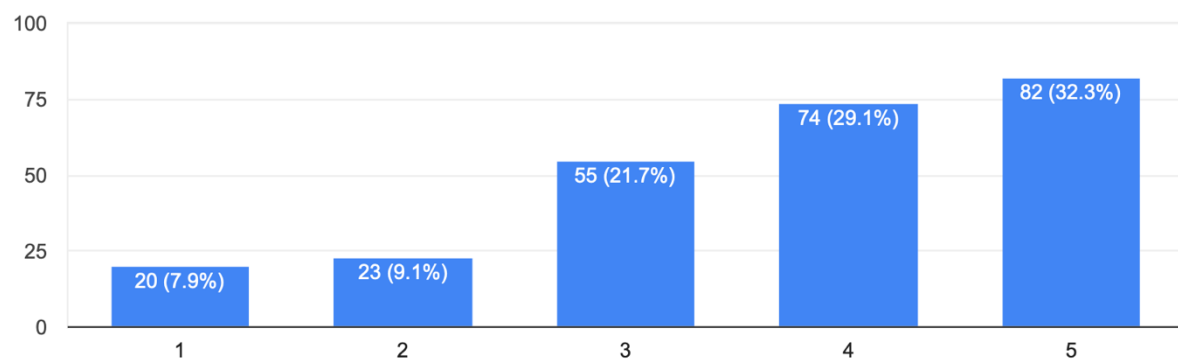One to one discussios with school counsellor — ~27

Section 4. Impact of the Pandemic on Wellbeing

My work-related stress levels over the last year have impacted negatively on my ability to do my job well
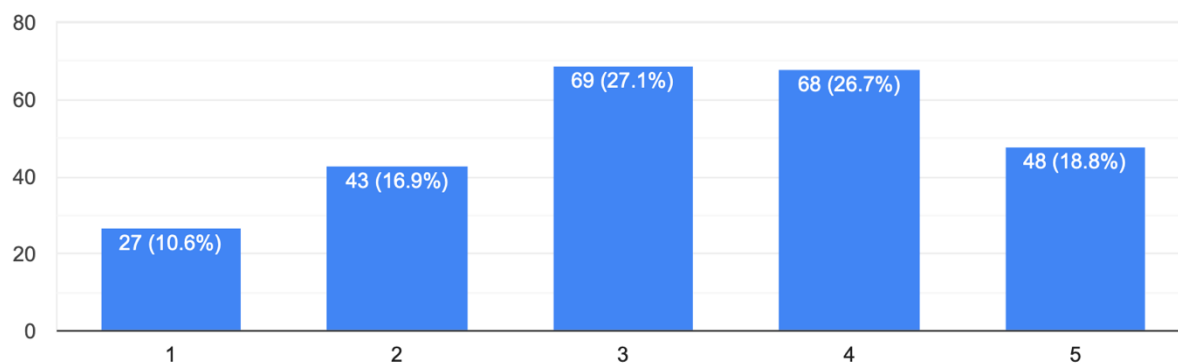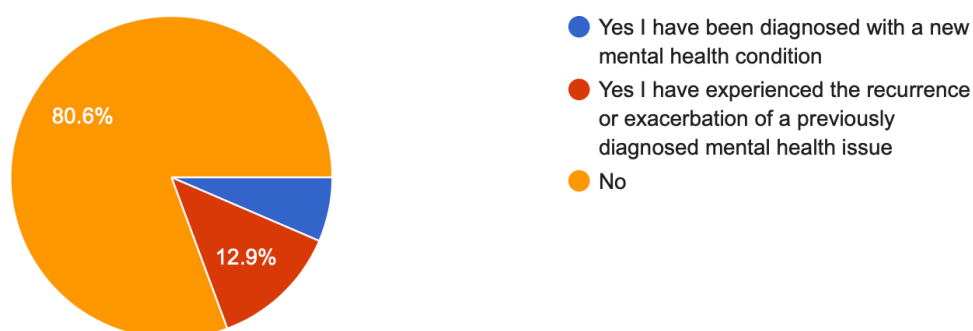

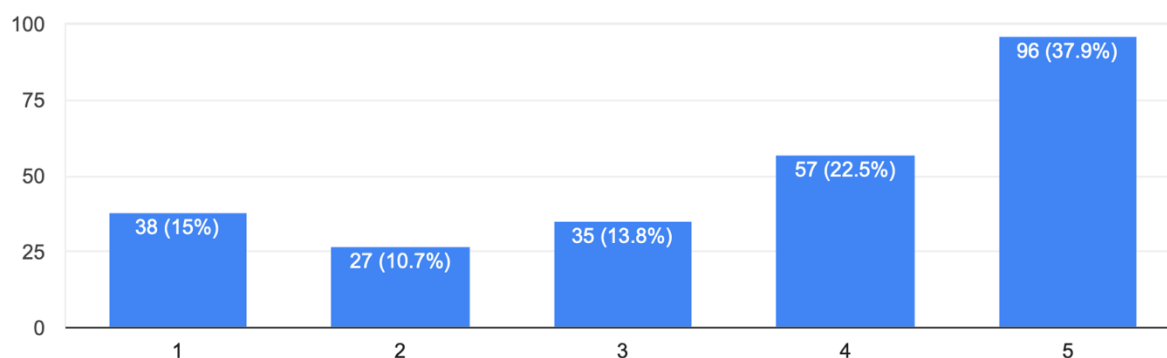### *My work-related stress levels over the last year have impacted negatively on my personal life*

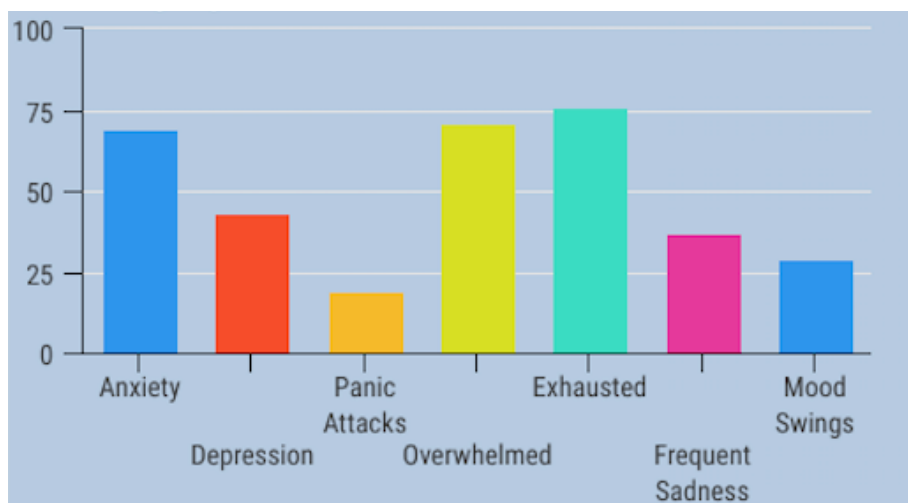## My work-related stress levels over the last year have impacted negatively on my physical health

Bar chart:
- 1: 25 (9.8%)
- 2: 23 (9.1%)
- 3: 59 (23.2%)
- 4: 70 (27.6%)
- 5: 77 (30.3%)
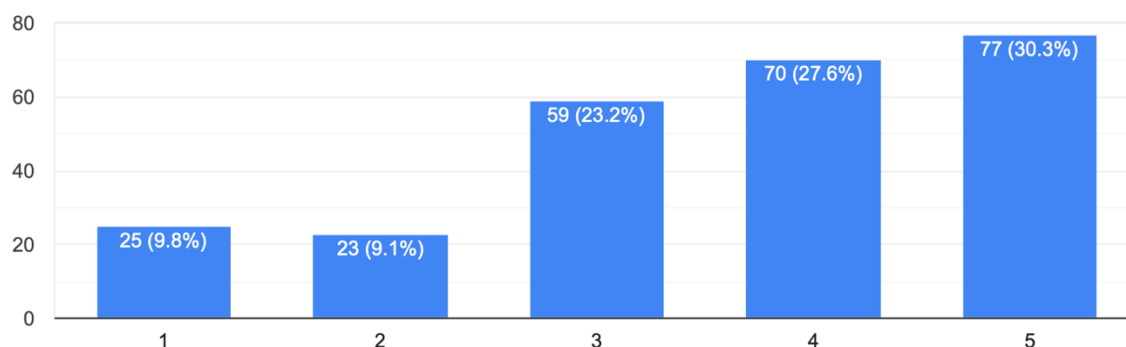
I have been diagnosed with a mental health issue in the last year or have had a recurrence or exacerbation of a previously diagnosed issue

Pie chart:
- 80.6%
- 12.9%

Legend:
- Yes I have been diagnosed with a new mental health condition
- Yes I have experienced the recurrence or exacerbation of a previously diagnosed mental health issue
- No

There have been times in the last year when I have felt close to breaking point

Bar chart:
- 1: 38 (15%)
- 2: 27 (10.7%)
- 3: 35 (13.8%)
- 4: 57 (22.5%)
- 5: 96 (37.9%)

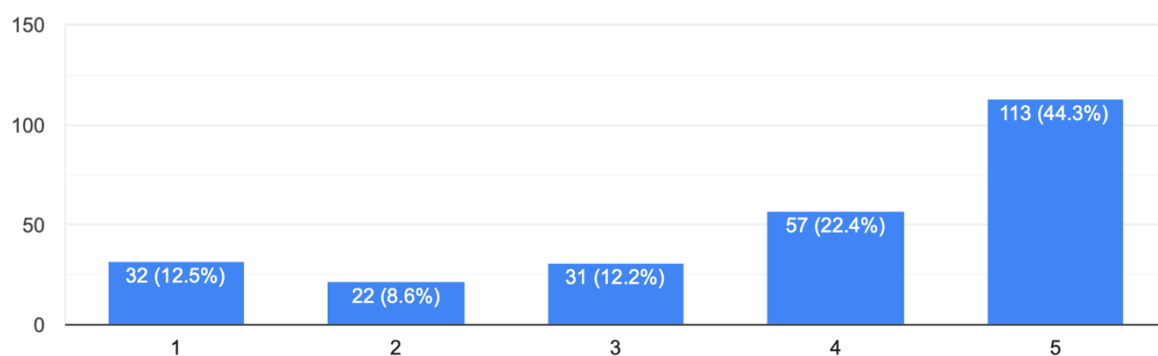International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic The 2021 Report

I have experienced the following symptoms of poor mental health (%)

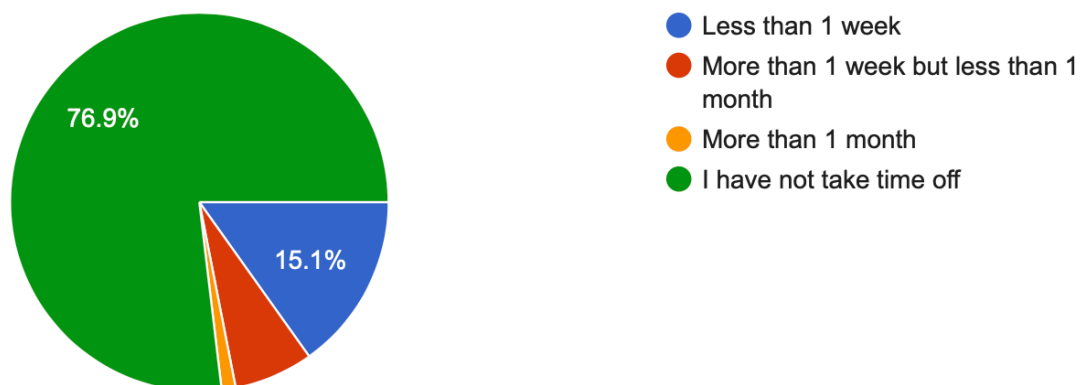## *I feel I have been getting enough sleep*
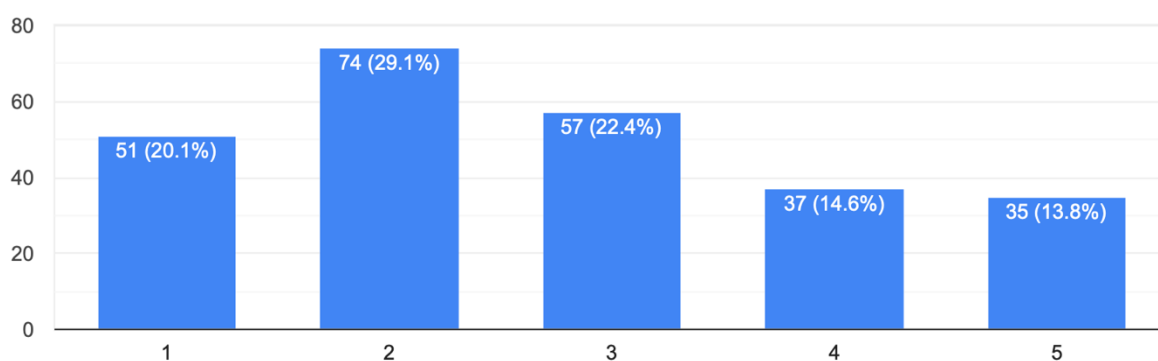
There have been times in the last year when I have felt lonely and isolated

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I have taken time off in the last year because of stress or mental ill health

Legend:
- ● Less than 1 week
- ● More than 1 week but less than 1 month
- ● More than 1 month
- ● I have not take time off

76.9%

15.1%

I would feel confident about disclosing a mental health issue to my employers and asking for help

1	99 (39.3%)
2	43 (17.1%)
3	49 (19.4%)
4	39 (15.5%)
5	22 (8.7%)
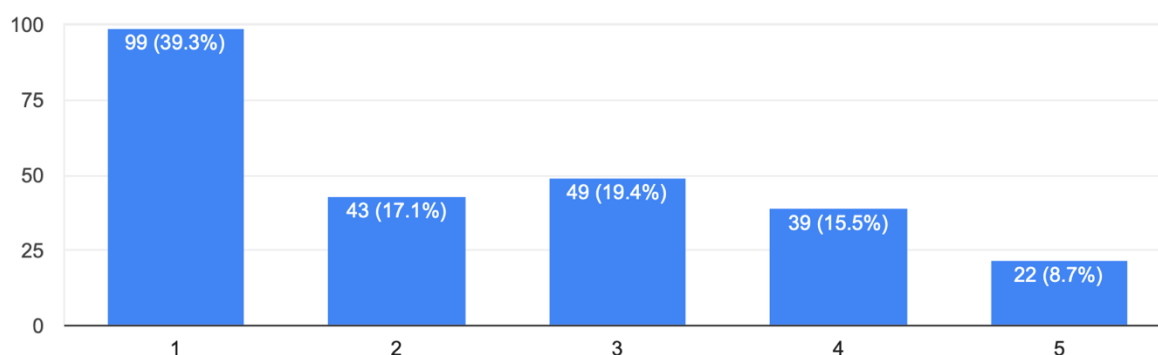
I have had concerns about the wellbeing of a colleague/colleagues

Major Concerns Moderate to Mild Concerns No concerns

25%
15%
60%
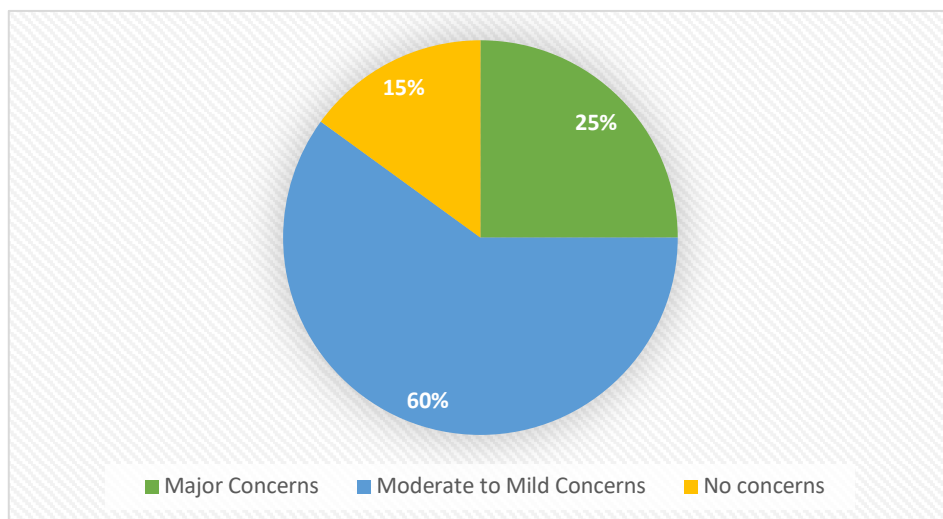
I have used the following strategies to help me to cope during the pandemic

Coping Strategies %

International School Teacher Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic The 2021 Report
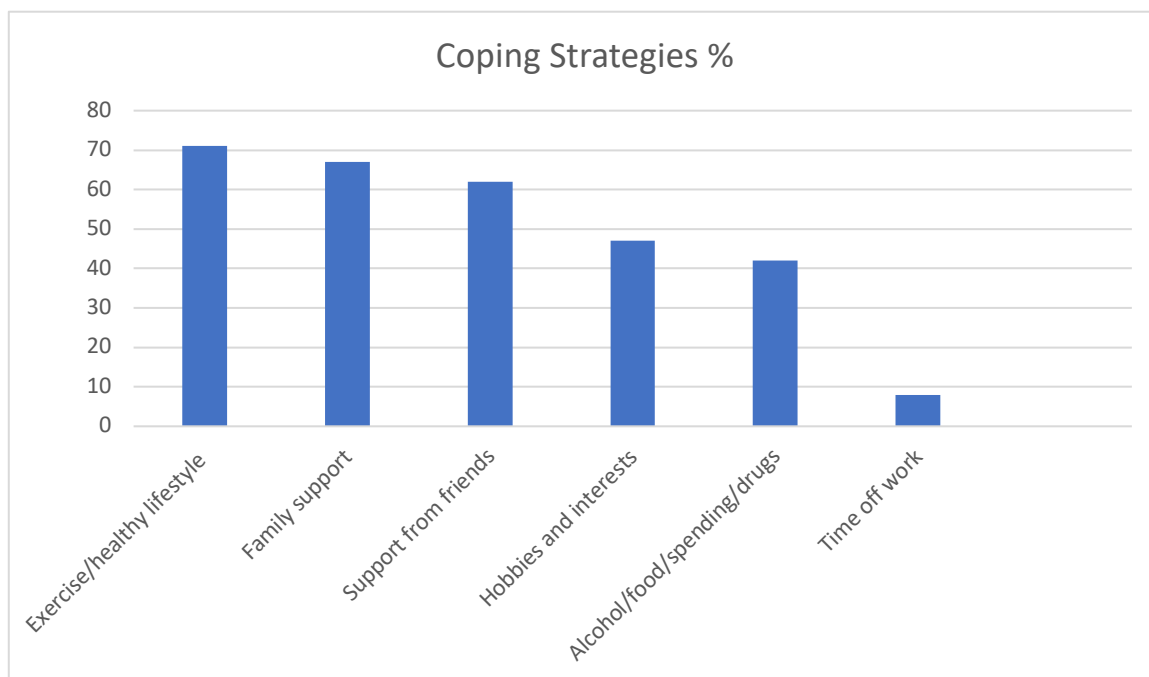
Section 5. Impact of the Pandemic on Career Choices

I have considered leaving my current school over the past year for reasons connected to the pandemic
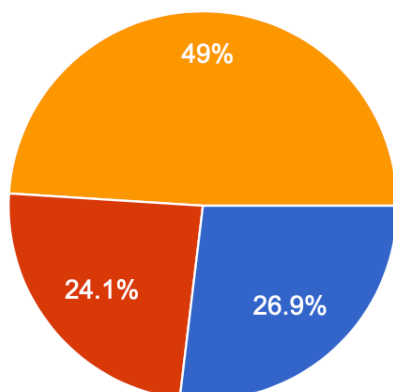
- Yes, I have decided to leave my current school
- Yes, I am thinking about leaving but I have not decided yet
- No, I plan to stay

I have considered leaving the international school sector over the past year for reasons connected to the pandemic
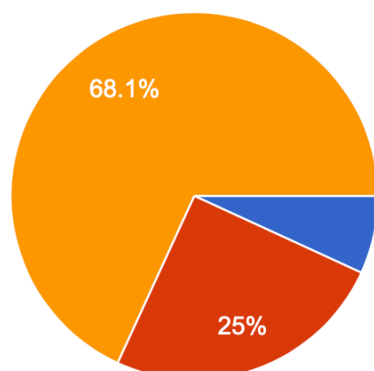
- Yes, I have decided to leave the international school sector
- Yes, I am thinking about leaving but I have not decided yet
- No, I plan to stay

I have considered leaving the teaching profession over the past year for reasons connected to the pandemic
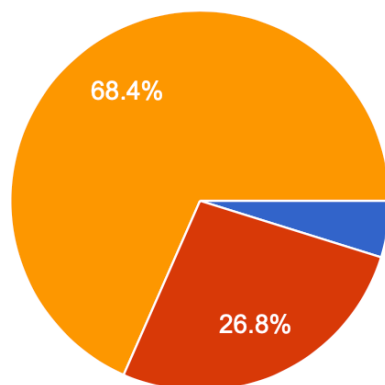
- Yes, I have decided to leave the teaching profession
- Yes, I am thinking about leaving but I have not decided yet
- No, I plan to stay

68.4%

26.8%

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Section 6. Other Issues and Concerns

I have been able to return to my home country to visit my family/friends in the last year

69.4%

25.4%

- Yes
- No
- I would not normally return home to visit family/friends

I feel safe and supported in the country where I am living

Rating	Count (Percentage)
1	19 (7.5%)
2	36 (14.2%)
3	63 (24.8%)
4	82 (32.3%)
5	54 (21.3%)
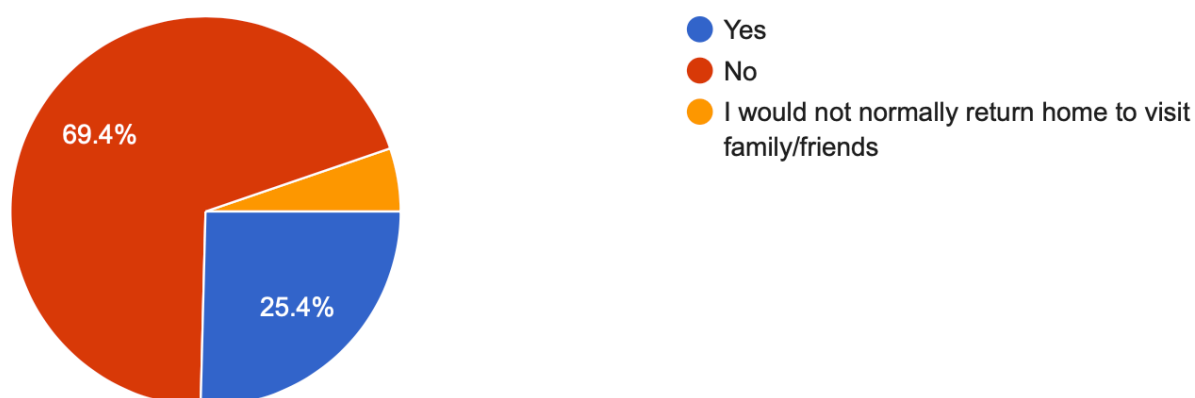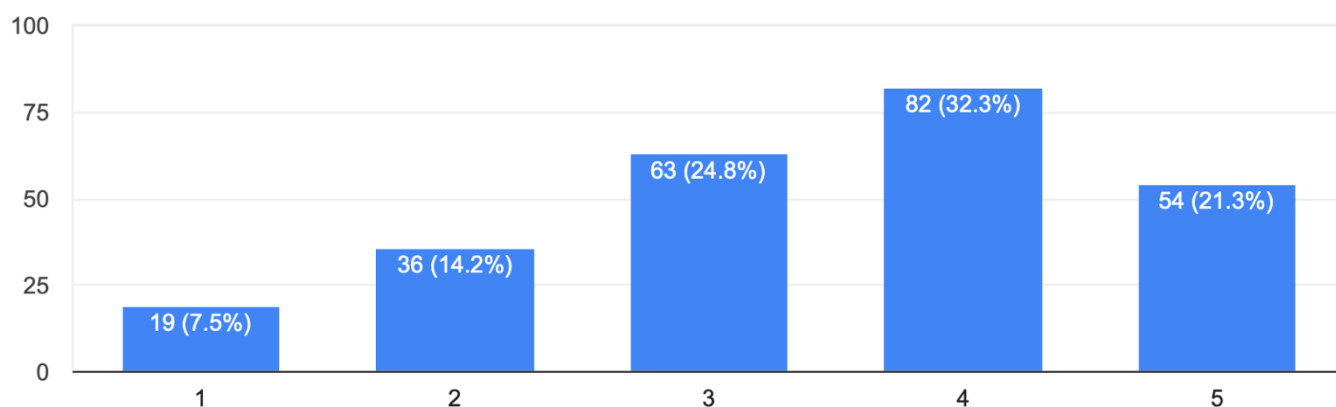
Qualitative Findings

Participants were asked to describe what has been the most challenging for them. The following themes emerged, illustrated in the participants' own words.

What is Working Well?

Although only 20% of participants felt that their workplace culture has had a positive effect on their wellbeing during the pandemic, schools with a positive culture shared a number of characteristics.

Relationships with and the attitudes of senior leadership emerged as a clear theme. Open communication between leadership and teachers; involving staff in the decision-making process; facilitating teacher agency; caring, appreciative and supportive leaders and the setting of realistic expectations by SLT were all characteristics of a positive school culture that supported teacher wellbeing.

"Plenty of opportunities to connect, socialise, reduce initiatives (or put on pause), sharing best practice to support each other, confidence in speaking to and reaching out to colleagues, gratitude and appreciation, managed teachers timetables to manage children at home as best we can, confidence with health and safety, clear and timely communication from SLT."

"They have tried to maintain open communication even though regulations from on high have changed almost daily."

"I feel valued, cared for, defended and appreciated during a time where life is tough."

"My administrators have tried their best to keep up morale and help us through the myriad of issues we deal with on a regular basis."

"Reduced school hours and realistic expectations for teachers and students."

"My school is supportive and allows us to work on campus (when it's safe) or from home. This flexibility is a major stress reducer for me. I've done both when needed for my mental health."

"Our senior admin listen and take action, implementing our suggestions to mitigate effects of online teaching and stress, etc."

"The school values time and wellbeing for all the staff. I am lucky I am in an established school so when it's not necessary the school normally gives the teacher a break-no unnecessary paper reports, meetings, and extra activities. This culture works for me so well."

Strong supportive relationships with colleagues emerged as another characteristic of a positive school culture, with the importance of team spirit and camaraderie mentioned often.

"My colleagues are genuinely good people who care deeply about education so that makes work a good place to be."

"Face to face interactions bring some light-heartedness .... shared burden and all that .."

"Our school does value relationships so my team is tight. We look after each other and share resources. We talk frequently and support each other. This has been a life saver for me."

"Staff members are supportive of each other and show deep caring for one another."

What is not Working Well?

The Demands of Implementing Online and Blended Learning Models

The demands and complexities of delivering learning in an online environment was by far the strongest theme emerging from the data. Teachers spoke of the challenges of redesigning lessons for online delivery.

"It has been difficult to say the least, to take units and have to figure out, revamp them to work for distant learning. This has been blocked in some case by admin because they felt like certain tasks (like using Flipgrid) were unsafe – decided w/out asking questions or investigating the platform. So the expectations were high but the school had no effective, engaging platforms to reach students."

This was challenging for almost everyone but more so for those who teach in areas that are by their nature hands-on or require face-to-face interaction. Teachers of music, special education and early years spoke of the hopelessness they have felt in trying to deliver meaningful learning to their students.

The amount of time it takes to prepare lessons for virtual delivery came through the research strongly, as did the need for teachers, parents and students to master new technology.

"The time it takes for digital preparation just never goes below a certain point. I can't get prepared for anything beyond the next lesson. It's like being a first-year teacher in my 32nd year."

"Never having used video I suddenly felt real pressure to become an overnight YouTube star. Some colleagues were setting the bar really high and others like me were really struggling. I was spending hours making a 3 minute video, which seemed a monumental waste of time but was expected each day."

"Trying to support the tech needs of parents has been the most stressful. Many parents have very little knowledge of tech related to education e.g. they may know how to take a short video or photo of their child's work but have difficulty learning to upload it into the school's drive or onto their children's digital workbooks."

The greatest challenge of distance learning has been engaging students and monitoring and feeding back about their learning.

'Finding ways to deliver online learning to children with very short attention span and yet still complete the work the teacher expects of them."

"Student learning is just not as strong when some students are completely online. Trying to create engaging online or physically distanced instruction is much more difficult. There are so many distractions for students, and it's much harder for me as a teacher to check their understanding."

"The most challenging aspect of teaching during the pandemic is the fact that government entities, school leadership teams, and parents conveniently forget what it is like for teenagers when they are home all day. They blame teachers when students are not engaged in the same way as they would be if they were

attending school physically. Expectations are totally unrealistic and this mindset also fails to reflect what the working day may be like for young people."

"Keeping students engaged in learning whilst not being able to connect in a face to face setting so we have not been able to build community and a sense of belonging."

"To predict and understand students' learning responses online was very hard, and then to make teaching adjustment accordingly online as well as adjust my own teaching plan at night or before the next online class. It was a constant battle."

"Giving constant, endless feedback to students. In order to maintain student engagement, I have tried my best to respond to the responses of my feedback. However, with over 100 students, it can become very challenging. Not answering "thank you" at a time like this can upset little kids – so sifting through all their posts can at times be exhausting."

While there have been many challenges presented by the return to face-to-face learning, the majority of participants prefer this model. However, many have found themselves in situations where they are expected to teach face-to-face and deliver online learning at the same time, in a blended model. This has proven to be highly problematic for some.

"Having to divide my class of 23 5 year olds into 3 bubbles across 2 classrooms, keeping social distancing between children, while SLT continues to implement the usual calendar, a very busy schedule of observations, book trawls etc. At the same time we have to teach live lessons to distance learners in the same day. We are doing this with no breaks for EY teachers and LAs due to bubbles not to be broken by additional adults. Teachers are exhausted, many won't take sick days as cover is difficult."

"The expectation to provide an effective online curriculum while teaching full time face to face with limited breaks. Constant changes in timetables and an expectation to eat a lunch at 11am within the 15 minute allocated break. The decisions made without consulting the whole staff and the lack of respect for teaching staff. The feeling that we are being treated like puppets and the instances where we are told that we are 'lucky to have a job' and decisions made are for our own 'mental health!' "

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Leadership and Parental Expectations

The challenges of online learning have been compounded by changing guidelines and expectations from senior leadership. Many participants spoke of the seemingly impossible demands placed upon them by senior leadership and parents.

"The increasingly high expectations around online learning from leadership with little support, being asked to be flexible every time the leadership pushes boundaries and then meeting with little flexibility from leadership in return."

"The amount of micromanagement from leadership made things much worse. Changing expectations and piling on the workload on a whim and then sending angry emails at all hours, making us feel constantly as if we are doing a bad job when we are really trying our best."

Teachers have been placed under considerable pressure by parents and have felt wounded by the lack of appreciation for their hard work and flexibility.

"Parents not understanding the programme or understanding it is not the same as face to face but still expecting the same amounts of time teaching/grouping. Expectations of teachers to be a babysitter to keep their child occupied so that they can work from home."

" Parents acting as if we don't work. Learning to do my job completely differently simultaneously with working full time in a pandemic and then having parents act as if we are on a vacation."

The Blurring of Boundaries Between Home and Work

Many teachers spoke of the lack of work-life balance and the inevitable blurring of boundaries between school and home life that working from home brings.

"Delivering Zoom sessions all morning, then planning meetings all afternoon and unexpected whole staff PD sessions, then in the evening posting everything to Seesaw while at the same time trying to manage giving feedback to the students and answering parent emails. I was working 16 hours a day and not having any time to spend with my own family."

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This has been particularly challenging for those with school aged children at home.

"Being a teacher parent who has to teach live lessons all day every day and has to support the learning of my own children at home has been very hard. There are no concessions to those of us who are parents. My wife had to go into her workplace so I was left on my own with the kids and some days it was chaos."

"Being a faculty parent – trying to support my own children as well as teach my students has, at times, been completely overwhelming. It's my own children's education that has suffered, not my students' though."

Teachers also talk about the impact of working from home on their physical and mental health.

"The lack of movement for myself in a work day is also difficult and focusing on a computer screen all day is difficult for the eyes and brain. I'm more exhausted at the end of the teaching day and I find I don't have much energy to get out for a walk or do any exercise. I worry about how unhealthy this is long term but short term it makes me feel awful."

"Also ranking top of the list for me has been the constant screen time. It is endless and exhausting."

"I love teaching but teaching face to face and interacting with people. The lack of human contact in online learning is definitely taking its toll and I hope that the pandemic is over soon."

Constant Change and Uncertainty

The lack of certainty around the developing situation has been a significant source of challenge for teachers. Moving in and out of face to face, blended and online learning, sometimes on short notice; lack of clarity about when the crisis will end and what the future will hold has placed a real strain on some.

"The "uncertainty", is it one week or month or longer of online learning? Will exams go ahead or not? What will the classroom will look like when/if we return? The background stress level is amped up for everyone, teachers/parents/learners. So little situations can become stressful situations very quickly. Planned/pre prepared work can become obsolete due to changing circumstances adding to the feeling of frustration. In an international setting job security also becomes a concern not to mention personal safety concerns especially at the beginning of the pandemic when it wasn't clear how deadly this virus is. For the first time in a long time the feeling that I am not in control of anything, it is surprisingly stressful especially if I dwell on it too much! Strange times."

Social Isolation

Many participants have struggled with the social isolation experienced as a result of government restrictions and working from home. This has had a significant impact on individuals who are new to their schools and have not had the opportunity to build social connections.

"Isolation, feeling like every individual complains of having too much work to take time to support or collaborate. Drastic reduction in social opportunities for staff/families."

"We are very isolated in the online teaching role. I am a people person and enjoy interacting and sharing ideas with others. this rarely happens in the online teaching situation. Lots of stress and problem solving and no time to have these discussions or too exhausted from looking at a screen we don't want any further screen time meetings."

"Because we have been online for the majority of the year, and this is a new school to me and my family being so disconnected has made everything more difficult"

"I am new to my school and feel like nobody, beyond a few colleagues, care that I'm here and struggling. I would really like for some sort of effort to be made to bring me into the community. This is such an isolating experience."

Changes to Terms and Conditions of Employment

Some participants spoke of stress brought about as a result of unexpected changes to their terms and conditions of employment. These included reduction in salary, allowances including housing, flight and PD, or gratuity. Others referred to increases in responsibility, sometimes coinciding with a reduction in pay. Participants also spoke about changes to the length of the school day to make up for lost learning time and loss of holiday time. A small number have lost their jobs due to reduction in student enrolment or their inability to travel overseas to take up their post.

"No step increase in salary at the start of the new year. No rental increase. No professional development allowance as per contract. No overseas order for departments) we are isolated from resources so this is crucial). No staff entertainment even though there is a fund. New building was given the go ahead to start construction despite reducing staff and cancelling budgets. Admin salary and benefits were not affected."

"Being forced to teach a different grade level than I anticipated, due to a colleague breaking contract, a hiring freeze and falling enrolment. I was informed about the switch 3 days before the first day of school."

"The renewal contract for teaching staff has been reduced. It varies from teacher to teacher with some teachers having more reductions than others. Heads of departments and heads of year have lost their stipend for their position of responsibility."

"The school suddenly reduced our housing allowance mid-year in June by $200 monthly which was a source of frustration and caused a lack of trust in the senior management and board. They also changed the allowance from dollar to local currency. People already had contracts with landlords negotiated."

"As students return to the classrooms, we have been told that we should be grateful that we have a job and that additional hours in the evenings, weekends and holidays will be an expectation."

Inability to Travel

Some participants referred to the stress created by their inability to travel home to visit friends and family during such a challenging time. Others who left China at the start of the pandemic were unable to return and worked at distance for many months.

"Being in 10 months, and counting, of quarantine; not traveling back home for the summer due to risks; having many of my colleagues on the other side of the world while teaching."

"The stress of knowing there is a pandemic but you cannot visit your family if there is a medical emergency at home."

"Not being in the same country. Working alone in a different time zone, not having daily contact with co-workers. The isolation is the hardest thing to deal with."

"Was locked out of the country for seven months, brought back (with my children) by the school at great expense and stress (including quarantine) to then have my job changed and limits on my contract.. Am now essentially stranded for an indefinite period and unable to leave the job."

School Culture

One hundred participants left comments about the impact of negative school culture on their wellbeing. The majority of these comments were focused upon school proprietors or senior leaders. I have included a large sample of these comments as the emotive language used by participants demonstrates their strength of feeling and their perspective deserves to be heard.

"The structural frame starting from the top is exploitative, demeaning towards staff."

"The toxic atmosphere forced down from the owner and governing body has been demoralising for all."

"I worry about how poorly staff are treated and the constant pressure they are under from a cruel and toxic leader."

"Due to pay/contract cuts, the culture has completely changed. People are angry, hurt and on edge waiting for the next cut. Money seems to be the most important value now, above staff safety."

"Demanding, inconsiderate, owner/director who has the attitude that if she pays you, she owns you. Who constantly changes everything on a whim and shows no trust or respect for staff. SLT team are good but can't stand against her as she just screams at them and won't follow their advice."

"A culture of careless overloading."

"They forgot the humanity. Management pitting staff against each other."

"The principal is incompetent and a bully. There are some people on senior leadership who are great and kind and supportive but the principal controls everything and makes all the decisions which are just awful in terms of staff welfare. Our deputy put together well-being stuff and his attitude was it's very "American" followed by an eye roll."

"Everything feels very cutthroat and as SLT are under stress, they are very unforgiving and borderline rude when their expectations have not been met."

"SLT & HR admin staff are incredibly unprofessional and have no genuine regard for staff. Incredibly toxic work environment."

Some participants spoke of a negative culture among their colleagues

"Pre-pandemic, workplace culture was impersonal and there was little social cohesion. The arrival of the pandemic and related social-distancing measures, staying within your bubble on the same floor etc. has only exacerbated things."

"Negativity throughout the staff body."

"Everyone tries to harm other people behind their backs."

"Not much camaraderie, too negative, people reacting instead of responding, blame game."

"Everyone is quite down, and struggling to get by. As a new teacher to the school I have been left a bit adrift. Not finding the support I need and I am under constant stress and demands."

"Toxic behaviours among staff being allowed to manifest."

Conclusion

This study highlights the main findings on international school teacher stress and wellbeing during the COVID 19 crisis 2020-21. Teachers from 46 countries took part in the study. Despite the varied contexts in which they work, the participants highlighted similar challenges and there is evidence to show that their experiences have been broadly similar.

Teachers have experienced very high levels of stress, beyond what they would consider normal for the job. This stress has been caused by a number of key factors. While teaching through the global pandemic is demanding for educators in all sectors, those working in international schools face a unique set of challenges due to the internationally mobile nature of their communities.

While most participants have strategies to help them to manage work-related stress, after a year of the living through a pandemic, these strategies have limited impact on the overall wellbeing of teachers. Participants have felt unsupported by their schools and many have struggled to cope. Many teachers are left feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by the demands they have faced. There is a very high reporting rate of symptoms or signs of poor mental health and a significant minority of participants have been diagnosed with the onset or exacerbation of a mental health condition during the past year. This should be of concern to senior and middle leaders, boards of governors/trustees/directors and parents.

At the time of writing this report, an end to the pandemic is in sight in some parts of the world with the successful roll out of the vaccination programme in countries like Israel and the UK. However, some countries are returning to high level restrictions as they battle with new waves of the virus and we are told that it will be many months before the world returns to normal. International school teachers need increased support if they are to push on through to the end of the crisis without a significant impact on their wellbeing, the effectiveness of their classroom practice and their desire to remain in their current school, the international school sector or the teaching profession as a whole.

Recommendations

This section focuses mostly on recommendations to ameliorate the stress that international school teachers are experiencing as a result of the current crisis. However, it also includes recommendations for building and maintaining a positive school culture, which is a longer term approach to support the flourishing of a whole school community.

Considering the wide scope of this study and the varied settings represented by international schools in 46 different countries, it is hard to make universal recommendations that cover every context. However, the following recommendations should be considered.

Recommendations for School Proprietors and Boards of Governors/Directors/Trustees

- Be proactive in driving wellbeing initiatives for your school in order to create a culture where looking after staff wellbeing is expected and starts at the top.
- Take a strategic approach to staff wellbeing and ensure it is embedded into the strategic planning process.
- Educate yourself on the value of staff wellbeing by becoming familiar with the research that demonstrates clear links between staff wellbeing and student outcomes.
- Develop a clear strategy to support school leader wellbeing so that leaders have the energy and emotional resources to support others.
- Encourage and support professional development opportunities for both board members and senior leaders that focus on building positive school culture and developing skills to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff.

Recommendations for School Leaders

In the Short Term

- Attend to your own wellbeing needs and the needs of your senior leadership team to ensure you have the energy and emotional resources to support the needs of others.
- Develop an individual wellbeing plan in collaboration with a member of the board, a leadership colleague or a professional coach/mentor.
- Be prepared to advocate for your needs to the school proprietor or board. Educate yourself on the research that demonstrates clear links between effective school leadership and student outcomes.
- Be prepared to advocate to the school proprietor or board about the importance of staff wellbeing and educate yourself on the research that demonstrates clear links between staff wellbeing and student outcomes.
- Actively elicit information about the current levels of wellbeing of your staff and their wellbeing needs. This is most effectively done through the use of a staff wellbeing survey specifically designed for use in international schools.
- Move beyond the "tick box" approach to staff wellbeing and individualise your approach to fit with the needs of your staff as much as possible. Staff can be offered a wide range of support and, where appropriate, be given options. An effective COVID-19 staff wellbeing programme should include the following.
  - Provision of information about managing wellbeing, including website links and helpline numbers.
  - Optional professional development sessions in-school or online on how to manage stress and support wellbeing.
  - Optional discussions about wellbeing with senior or middle leaders or, where appropriate, school counsellors.
  - Opportunities to socially connect with others, including team building and maintenance activities, whether face-to-face or online.
  - Time allocated to facilitate the development of an individual wellbeing plan in collaboration with a line manager or colleague.
  - Modified working hours, where possible, in order to provide a better work-life balance in the form of shorter school days,

wellness days/half days built into the regular schedule, longer lunch breaks or a reduced teaching timetable.

- o A more flexible approach to the expectations placed on staff, especially in relation to paperwork and other non-essential tasks.
- o Opportunities to access professional counselling/coaching paid for by the school.
- o Genuine appreciation, saying thank you, giving gifts. Although this on its own will have limited impact.

- Identify the staff who are most in need and follow up with them proactively on a regular basis. Make adjustments to their working conditions, where necessary and where possible, including encouraging them to take paid mental health leave . This may help to avoid a mental health crisis or burnout situation occurring.
- Educate parents on the importance of staff wellbeing and share research that demonstrates clear links between staff wellbeing and student outcomes.

In the Longer Term

- Take a strategic approach to staff wellbeing and ensure that it is part of the strategic planning process.
- Develop a staff wellbeing policy but also look at other policies that may impact on staff wellbeing such as the staff appraisal/evaluation policy, professional development policy, human resources policy and the terms and conditions of employment.
- Develop structures to allow for the regular flow of communication about staff wellbeing between staff and middle and senior leadership.
- Focus on building a positive school culture. If you do not already have this in place then it will take time. The main elements in relation to staff are as follows:
  - o Working towards common goals built upon shared values.
  - o Building and maintaining positive relationships, ensuring everyone feels heard and valued and has a sense of belonging.
  - o Developing a culture of collaboration
  - o Improving communication
  - o Empowering staff through increased educator agency.
  - o Providing an environment where all staff understand their strengths and those of others and have opportunities to use and develop their strengths.
  - o

o Establishing an environment that enables all staff to realise their professional potential.

Recommendations for Teachers

- Take active responsibility for your own wellbeing.
- Be prepared to advocate for your needs to the senior leadership team. Educate yourself on the research that demonstrates clear links between teacher wellbeing and student outcomes.
- Use the PERMAH model to support your own wellbeing. Start by taking the PERMAH Wellbeing Survey and develop a set of PERMAH wellbeing goals based on the outcomes of the survey.
- Ensure you are getting enough rest. Read *The Power of Rest by Matthew Edlund* for ideas on how to increase opportunities for rest during the working day.
- Develop an individual wellbeing plan, preferably in collaboration with a middle/senior leader or a colleague, that identifies proactive steps you can take to support your own wellbeing; your triggers for stress and the actions or behaviours you can use to help avoid these triggers.
- Make the most of opportunities offered by your school to focus on and improve your wellbeing.
- Be supportive of others, recognise when they need help and be prepared to act.

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Further Information

If you would like further information on any of the following, please contact me.

- Comprehensive strategies to support staff wellbeing
- Staff wellbeing surveys for international schools
- Wellbeing tracking for international schools
- Individual wellbeing planning
- Research on links between effective school leadership and student outcomes.
- Research on links between staff wellbeing and student outcomes.

Dr Helen Kelly is a former international school principal, independent postdoctoral researcher, writer, speaker and consultant in the field of school wellbeing. www.drhelenkelly.com

For further information please contact Helen Kelly theposprincipal@gmail.com

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Dr Helen Kelly The Positive Principal 2021