

GIVE US A BREAK

As summer approaches, Vic Goddard is considering parental perceptions of school holidays...

Ruddy teachers! All those holidays and then they decide they need an extra training day or five. And don't get me on the snow closures..." Heard those comments before? Of course you have. As have I; I always especially enjoy them when they are delivered with the added bonus of "if you had a 'real' job you'd know what hard work is." Throw in the comments back in April of the Secretary of State espousing the virtues of shorter holidays and longer days, and it starts to look a little like a concerted attack (I seem to recall that he called the current school term dates and timings to be a 'throwback' – surely I'm not the only person to have seen the irony in that?)

Do we, as educators, really have enjoy the luxury of extremely long holidays during which we do nothing related to school? Or is it the case, as some teachers are wont to claim when the issue is raised for the fiftieth time in five days, that we spend every day of our vacations marking and preparing lessons etc? The answer to both questions is obviously no – so what is the truth?

A TUC study, reported back in March, stated that teachers contributed 325 million hours of unpaid work in 2012. The cost of this 'overtime' if paid: £7 billion! Apparently, in the secondary sector a majority of us are clocking up an average of 10 unpaid hours a week. I have to

be fair and also report that we were beaten in the overtime league table by the managers/directors of financial institutions – but I'm not sure that our average wage matches theirs (around £70 000, if you're thinking of a career change).

I'm not advocating that we should stop doing what we need to do to ensure our young people are successful; I know this is at odds with the current 'work to rule', but that is a whole different article. However just a hint of recognition that by the end of term we are crawling over the line as we have given every ounce of energy, passion and commitment that we have would be nice.

I think the reality is that most teachers continue to work when they are not in school and I know, from our 'lone working' book that is in place during holidays, that the majority of our staff certainly come in. Often this is to clear their emails and the backlog of 'little' jobs that get bypassed when we are flat out; it helps all of us to find time to do the things that really matter, like planning great learning experiences for the students.

If you continue to add in the weekends and 'holidays' that staff spend extending the students' learning by organising trips, rehearsing for the school production and giving extra support for the young people that need it to meet their expectations, then the picture is somewhat different. The majority of

VIC GODDARD IS
HEAD TEACHER
AT PASSMORES
ACADEMY – AS
SEEN ON CHANNEL
4'S 'EDUCATING
ESSEX' SERIES



jobs don't require that a great deal of work is carried out at home. My dad was a plumber, a very good one of course, but I don't remember him spending hours at the weekend practising how to stop a dripping tap, just to make sure he got it right (still less working on innovative schemes to help the tap feel so good about itself that it found strategies to deal with its own mechanical issues).

If for some reason it was decided that the distribution of terms were to alter and the summer break were shortened to four weeks, with the extra weeks distributed at other times, it wouldn't be the end of the world. We'd cope – maybe by altering how some things are done, but after all, we have coped with bigger changes. However the truth is that I would find really difficult to sustain my energy for longer, and I'm sure that applies to my staff members, too. I'm more susceptible to making poor decisions when I am tired; I know it, so I put strategies in place for checking before finalising them, but it's not an ideal way of working. I don't want to do my job badly, I want to be at my best every day because my students deserve that, but there are times, frankly, that my batteries are flat.

However, everyone is under pressure these days. And the last thing overworked and underpaid parents need to hear about is how tough it can be for educators towards the end of another school year. So my response to the eternal complaints about 'ruddy teachers' and their 'endless holidays' is always a cheery, "I know, great isn't it! You get to spend quality time with your children!"

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