

Tips for organising in schools

A guide for UNISON reps and organisers

UNISON
the public service union

What is this guide for?

This guide has been developed to help UNISON reps and organisers recruit new UNISON members and organise in schools.

UNISON is the largest education union in the UK with almost 350,000 members; more than 250,000 are school support staff.

UNISON is the union for all school staff apart from teachers and headteachers. Business managers, caterers, teaching assistants, cleaners, ground staff, technicians, librarians, school nurses, crossing patrol staff… and all the other staff who help our schools run smoothly, efficiently and safely are UNISON members.

We have members who work in local authority and academy schools and members who work for private companies contracting services to schools. All are welcome in UNISON.



School staff concerns and issues

School support staff have told us that their concerns include:

- attacks on their terms and conditions and jobs cuts
- health and safety issues such as violence against staff, bullying, stress and asbestos in schools
- being asked to administer medicine or perform medical interventions when they are not properly trained or fairly rewarded
- heavy workload and unreasonable demands
- the lack of continued professional development (CPD) and training
- the low pay of all staff and lack of a living wage for many of the lowest paid
- many school support staff and teaching assistants feel there is a lack of recognition for the important work they carry out
- poor communication and deployment in schools
- uncertainty caused by some schools in England becoming academies.

Understanding these issues will help you talk to staff and recruit them. UNISON has knowledgeable staff at branch, regional and national level who understand education issues and are available to advise and support organisers and members.

We also have specialist materials on the issues above and other campaigns that UNISON is running for school support staff.



Planning and mapping in the workplace

Mapping the workplace will give you a good overall picture of the members in your school and where membership can be increased. Once you have carried out your mapping exercise, planning the next steps will be much easier. Keep in mind that there may be several employers on the site, for example where catering and cleaning are run by private contractors.

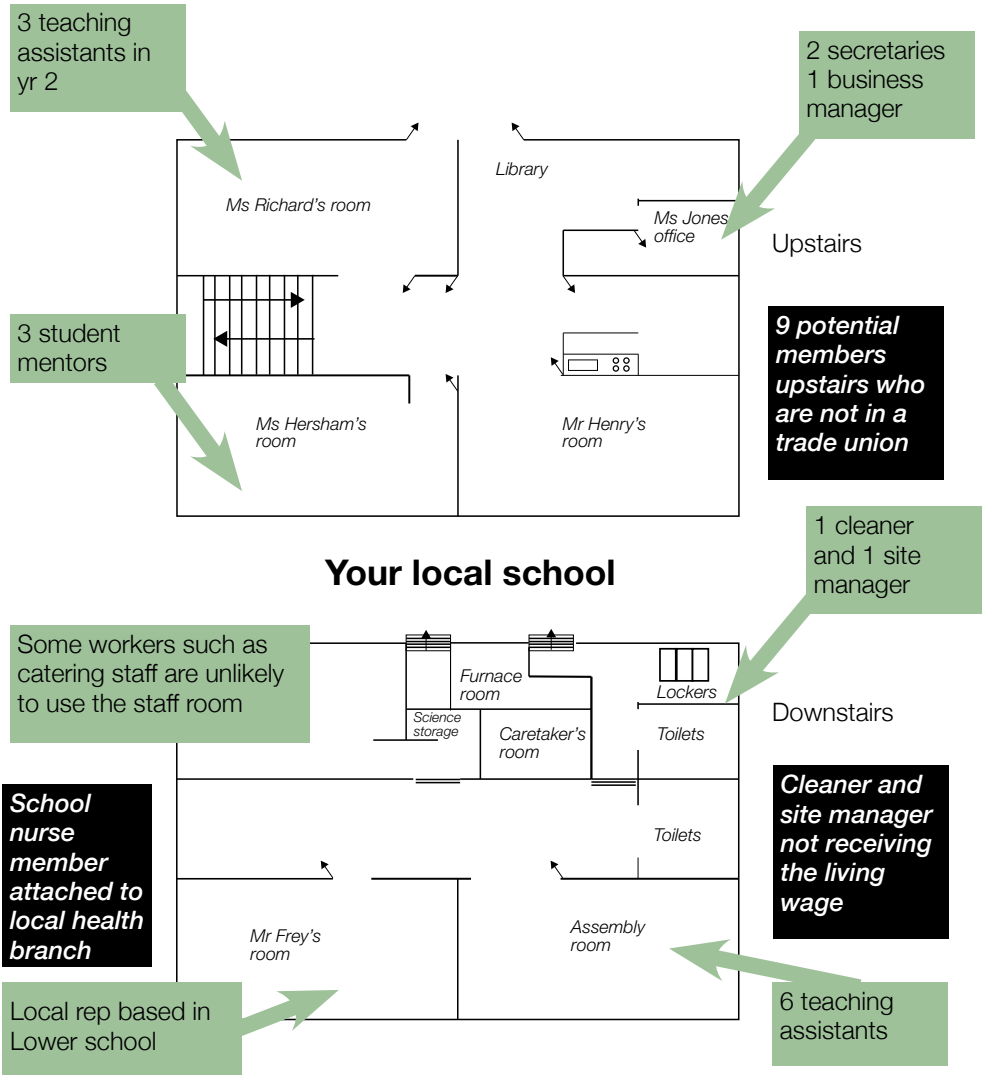
Questions to ask

- Who is the main employer? Is it the local authority, the school, an academy trust, or other?
- How many members do you have working in the school?
- Where are most of your members working currently?
- Are there any gaps in your workplace membership?
- How many potential members are there?
- How many workplace reps or shop stewards are there?
- What are the main concerns of staff?

The mapping exercise will help you identify potential members. Being aware of issues in the school enables you to persuade staff to join and to support current members in resolving issues. You will be able to use your map to build stronger membership, leading to stronger bargaining power.

Adapt this model for your own school. It is helpful if you send a copy to your branch or region for their information.

An idea for mapping in a small school setting



Building a UNISON presence in your school

Things to consider…

- Some staff may be unavailable during school hours, which means talking to them at the beginning or end of a working day. Others might be available during the lunch break. Always make sure that you have relevant and updated materials handy.
- Organise a meeting and invite non-members too. It is important that potential members see that UNISON reports back and listens to members' views at every step.
- Ask about members' and non-members' issues. Don't assume because you work in the same organisation that you all have the same problems.
- Quick short surveys can help you gain information on school support staff concerns. Consider whether your survey needs to be anonymous to protect the identity of staff. You can request a template by emailing: education@unison.co.uk
- Tell staff about UNISON's successes. Tell them how we could campaign for their issues. If you have a plan, this will make them feel confident. If they know where we have succeeded they will see the relevance of UNISON.
- There is no substitute for face-to-face conversations. While messages and emails have their place, active listening and engaging will develop strong working relationships.
- Ask them directly if they will join UNISON.



- Freebies (pens, diaries and literature) with UNISON's name on will raise the union's profile in the workplace.

- Try to identify members who might become activists too. Encourage them with training and information.

- Is there anything you need to help you, for example UNISON schools leaflets, newsletter and publicity materials? Order them online from: unison.org.uk/onlinecatalogue. If you experience any problems email: stockorders@unison.co.uk

- Don't forget to make contact with school / education convenors – the branch lead rep for schools in your local UNISON branch can be a useful resource.

- UNISON training is popular, particularly among members who do not receive training from their employer. Always have the up-to-date region or branch training brochure to hand and highlight the benefits.

- Does your UNISON branch have a Facebook page or Twitter account? Social media is a good way of getting issues out to a wider audience. Your school may have a policy on social media so make sure you know the boundaries.

- You can get school contact telephone numbers from the internet. Ask to speak to the school office and/or to speak with the PA to the head/ principal in the school.





Tips for an effective UNISON meeting

- Decide the **best date and time** for the meeting. Note term times (particularly half-terms which can vary by area). Look at which times suit most members; this may be lunchtime or outside the working day. It may be necessary to meet off site.
- Start by trying to **get the support of the head**/ principal and/or the school business manager – it is often more successful to make an appointment in person.
- **Advertise the meeting** using posters and messages in staff mail boxes (if they have them). Give plenty of notice of visits and remember to include school meals staff, cleaning and site staff.
- **Short, informal meetings** often work best with room for lots of questions.
- **Start and end on time.** This seems obvious, but starting and ending late wastes everyone's time.
- Remember that it's helpful to spend a little time in conversation. People need to **build friendships**, they need a chance to show their personalities and they need to establish a rapport. Meetings are very important for this process.
- **Ask for feedback** from staff on their issues and concerns and build these into the agenda.

- If some people hesitate to join in, find a way to **include** them.
- **Share the credit** and praise. Be quick to point out great work.
- **Always be kind.** Making people feel stupid isn't productive.
- **Have an agenda and stick to it.** If possible, circulate the agenda in advance, along with anything else that needs to be read in preparation for the meeting. Perhaps the UNISON schools newsletter could be a regular agenda item for discussion.
- **Don't say things** that will undermine or annoy other people.
- **Be specific about agreed actions** and who will do what by when. Make sure someone keeps track of what is supposed to happen as a consequence of the meeting and, at the meeting's end, review these items so it's crystal clear to everyone. Follow up by email and set deadlines.
- **Stay on track.** If people want a chance to discuss other issues that aren't relevant to the purpose of the meeting set up a separate meeting.
- **Useful topics:** Pay, Living Wage, CPD, facilities time in the school, national issues, and information for members from the school, academy or management meetings.
- Don't forget UNISON holds an **annual national school seminar.** Ask the local branch secretary for more details about this popular event or email: education@unison.co.uk.



Useful materials and information

Join us

Schools staff can join UNISON by calling free: **0800 171 2194**

Join online

joinunison.org

Call us

UNISON's own call centre, UNISON Direct, is open from 6am till midnight Monday to Friday, 4pm on Saturdays, and is free to call on 0800 0 857 857.

UNISON's online catalogue

unison.org.uk/onlinecatalogue

There are publications, leaflets, posters, noticeboard headers, campaign materials and much more available to order online from our catalogue. Regional organisers and staff will need to get an ordering code from UNISON communications at national office (020 7121 5481). Branch officers can order using their membership number. You can also view and download pdfs of most documents on the catalogue.

Some examples of useful materials for schools staff that you can order free:



Recruitment

Essential cover for school support staff recruitment leaflet (stock number 3301)

Essential cover for school support staff recruitment poster (stock number 3302)

Essential cover noticeboard header (stock number 3215)

Great deals for UNISON members – welcome to UNISONplus leaflet (stock number 0711)

UNISON in Schools newsletter (stock number 2166)

Living Wage



Stickers – *UNISON campaigning for a Living Wage in schools* (stock number 3255)

Campaigning, organising and negotiating for a Living Wage – A UNISON guide (stock number 3338)

Guidance

Term-time working – negotiating advice for schools staff (stock number 2538)

Dealing with Health Needs in Schools – leaflet (stock number 3297)

Managing Medicines and Providing Medical Support in Schools and Early Years Settings – UNISON branch advice (stock number 2537)



Education Our Future – The UNISON agenda (stock number 3066)

Branch advice on 'rarely cover' arrangements for teachers and implications for support staff (stock number 2795)

Free schools, UTCs and studio schools – A briefing for UNISON activists and organisers: http://www.unison.org.uk/documents/604

UNISON working together with academies (for use when talking to employers) (stock number 3190)

Health and safety information: unison.org.uk/knowledge/health-and-safety

Support in UNISON

UNISON members in schools have a voice in UNISON and there is a wider support network available.

The local UNISON branch

Schools are part of a wider UNISON branch. The branch secretary and executive team share information on what is happening locally in schools and how members are affected. Many branches also negotiate terms and conditions for school support staff in some schools.

UNISON regions

There are 12 regions in UNISON. Regional staff work for the union and regional committees are made up of elected UNISON members. Events, training and campaigns are often organised at a regional level.

Some regions have schools forums where school reps can get together to exchange information, get updates and hear from guest speakers and specialists.

UNISON national office

Staff at UNISON national office support the work going on in regions and branches and campaign at a national level with government, decision makers, opinion formers and the media on issues affecting members.

UNISON has a national school support staff sector committee, which oversees UNISON's work in schools. It is made up of representatives elected from UNISON regions.

Nationally, UNISON negotiates pay at the National Joint Council (NJC) for England, Northern Ireland and Wales and in the Scottish National Joint Council.

UNISON also negotiates pay and conditions with the large academy chains and has working relationships with the Schools Co-operative Society, the Catholic Education Service and the National Society of the Church of England.

The benefits of being in UNISON

Members can get:

- advice, support and help when you need it at work
- a helpline that is open until midnight
- legal help for you at work and your family at home (terms and conditions apply)
- financial assistance and debt advice in times of need and access to our credit unions
- compensation for accidents and injuries at work.

As well as protection and support at work, there are so many benefits to being in UNISON. These include our own holiday centre in north Devon, deals on car, pet and home insurance, savings on new cars and breakdown cover and much more. Check our website for up to the minute deals and see our leaflet:

Great deals for UNISON members – welcome to UNISONplus
(stock number 0711)

UNISON is the union for school support staff.
We have 250,000 members working in schools.

Join us.

Three simple ways to join UNISON today:



Join online at
joinunison.org



Call us on
0800 171 2193



Ask your UNISON rep for an application form

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