

Press release: Damian Hinds: School leaders should ditch email culture to cut workload

Teachers should not have to email outside of office hours and should instead embrace innovative technology such as AI to help to reduce their workload, the Education Secretary said in a speech today (Wednesday, 23 January).

Addressing more than 800 of the world's leading tech companies and start-ups, as well as school representatives and international education ministers, at the Bett Show in London, Mr Hinds told teachers and school leaders to make smarter use of technology, both inside and outside of the classroom, to make sure that it does not add to teachers' responsibilities.

The Education Secretary said that while education technology has the power to transform education, its growth in the classroom has created both opportunities and challenges.

He cited the example of email and the impact it has had on working lives.

Mr Hinds said:

More than half of teachers' time is spent on non-teaching tasks, including planning, marking and admin, and that workload is one of the most common reasons for teachers leaving the profession.

Education is one of the few sectors where technology has been associated with an increase in workload rather than the reverse. And let's think why.

Back when I was at school there was an annual parents evening and a report at the end of the year. May be a letter home if there was a school trip. That report still happens and so does the parents evening, but email has revolutionised parent, teacher communication. Email hasn't replaced much; mostly it has just added.

I'm sure none of us now could imagine a life without email, but do we ever stop to think how much of our day is actually spent reading or replying to them?

In many or perhaps all occupations, email takes up a lot time. MPs have seen a step change in correspondence and contact through email. For many teachers the situation is even more intense, with a huge volume of emails from parents and their senior leadership team that they need to respond to outside of lesson time.

Many schools are already reviewing their school practices to reduce

workload – and to those who haven't already, I encourage them to look at what they can do to shift away from an email culture in, and into, school to free teachers up to spend more time in the classroom.

A shift away from the email culture, so often prevalent in schools, has been implemented successfully in St Edward's secondary school in Dorset, which developed a communications policy and a clear email protocol after its head teacher realised that staff were spending far too much time sifting through and replying to unnecessary emails.

The school took steps to ban emails to an 'all staff' distribution list and started a short weekly bulletin – a simple solution which reduced email traffic considerably. The senior leadership team also set out expectations for when email should and shouldn't be used, and how long staff should have to respond.

This example was included in the Workload Reduction Toolkit, a series of online resources released last year by the Department for Education to help school leaders take action to remove burdensome responsibilities, which has been viewed more than 192,000 times and downloaded more than 84,000 times since its release in July 2018.

Damian Hinds also cited Bolton College, which is using an artificial intelligence to reduce the hours teachers spend on administrative tasks:

At Bolton College, for instance, they have used IBM Watson, an artificial intelligence programme, to build a virtual clerk they call 'Ada'.

Ada helps deliver personalised learning and assessment for 14,000 students [and] queries about attendance or curriculum content.

It has saved Bolton's staff hours and hours of time they would have spent on admin either at college or in their own spare time.

This is showing tech at its most transformative and enabling.

Alongside these examples, the Department is supporting proposals in Ofsted's new inspection framework that focus on reducing teacher workload, including considering staff workload as part of the leadership and management judgment, looking unfavourably on schools that implement burdensome data practices and refusing to look at internal assessment data.

In his speech, Mr Hinds outlined his plans to launch an EdTech strategy later this year to harness the power of technology in schools, strengthening the training teachers receive, reducing their workload, and unleashing young people's potential – backed by a £10 million fund to support innovative uses of tech in schools and colleges across England.

This will build on the support provided through the Government's Modern Industrial Strategy for innovative, high-tech firms to start, scale and grow.

This investment will be supported by a group of schools and colleges selected to aid the development, piloting and evaluation of innovative technology – and the Education Secretary will use the speech to call on the education sector to work together to make the most of the benefits that technology offers.