



Teacher recruitment – when will there be good news?

Yasmin Maskatiya, Head of Standards and Effectiveness

As I write this article, I know that many of my colleagues are increasingly concerned about recruitment and retention in their schools. I vividly remember the ongoing struggle to recruit strong staff as a headteacher. The increasing anxiety as 31 May approached would be agonising, as I realised that I was running out of options to fill the remaining posts. Ultimately, one of the most important components of school improvement is having a full complement of teachers and teaching assistants. However, many schools are currently facing the prospect of having to patch together temporary staff teams in order to cover vacancies. Often headteachers will be forced to do this knowing that the quality is not what it should be. Yet, they simply have no choice.

Checking job vacancies today in June, there are 11,480 posts being advertised by Tes. In West Sussex alone, there are in excess of 500 vacancies waiting to be filled for September 2023. Five years ago, when I left headship, the job market was challenging. now, it is close to impossible to source the right people for what is one of the most important jobs in society.

How have we got to this point?

The National Education Union (NEU) recently published a poll that it had commissioned to ask teachers key questions about their experiences and future plans. The findings show that 44% of teachers plan to leave the profession by 2027. In the survey of 1,788 teachers, a fifth (22%) said they would leave within two years. The main reason cited was a heavy workload. More than half of respondents (52%) said the workload was “unmanageable” or “unmanageable most of the time”. This statistic is significantly up from 35% in 2021.

For those planning to leave within two years, workload was the key motivation for 65% of respondents. Concerns about the level of trust in teachers from the public and government were also significant factors.

Teachers also cited pay and accountability as reasons to consider leaving. “I am desperate to get out of education due to workload, constant monitoring and paperwork,” one teacher said.

Teachers said schools were finding it difficult to fill vacancies, leading to a doubling up of roles, with 73% reporting the issue had got worse since the start of the pandemic. “People leave and then their responsibilities [are] added to another role,” one teacher said.

Two-thirds of secondary school teachers (66%) said the issue of vacant teaching assistant and support staff posts had worsened since March 2020. One respondent said there were “far too few” teaching assistants and that they were being asked to cover classes more than ever before.



For those who had thought about stress at work, two-thirds reported they were stressed at least 60% of the time, with one teacher reporting that stretched staffing had left staff "close to burnout".

Dr Mary Bousted, the joint general secretary of the NEU, said successive education secretaries had "failed to get a grip on the issues facing teachers". "We remain a profession with amongst the highest number of unpaid working hours, and we are still well above the international average for hours worked by teachers. This is simply unsustainable and can only lead to burnout," she said.

She said the government should not simply accept that high workload was a problem, but that it had "played a starring role in many of the contributing factors".

"Our survey findings show that whether it be recruitment targets missed, talented teachers leaving the profession, the pernicious effects of a punitive and deeply flawed inspection system, or the effect of real-terms cuts to pay over many years, a national policy decision is always the villain of the piece," she said.

She said the Department for Education needed to take steps to "right the ship" as too many teachers were leaving the profession while there were too few new recruits to replace them. "This is to a very large extent because the job is made unattractive and unsustainable," she said.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER report) published in April 2023 reinforces this view of the profession. Recruitment to initial teacher training courses was considerably lower than targets set for 2022 and this year suggests that recruitment will be even worse. Bursaries have helped to a degree but those subjects that do not attract a bursary have seen a further decline in applications. For instance, trying to find a secondary English teacher is a real challenge, yet the subject does not carry a bursary. Is it any wonder that there are increasing numbers of non-specialist teachers delivering subjects outside of their expertise?

And yet, despite the obvious issues, little is being done to safeguard the quality of education in our schools. Instead, we have chronic and severe shortages of teacher supply, plus an existing workforce that is locked in a pay and conditions dispute with the Government that shows no sign of imminent resolution.

What needs to change?

The answer is plenty. Teaching is a noble profession and one that changes young lives dramatically and decisively. Yet, we continue to under pay and under value the staff who perform miracles on a daily basis in our schools. As a society, we do not trust, value, and respect the work that staff in schools do. We need to think very carefully about the consequence of not giving proper recognition and reward to those delivering education to our children and young people.

Do we do enough to support staff when they request flexible working? Are there sufficient advantages to entice people to come in to teaching and stay there? Do we care for and support our colleagues so that their wellbeing is prioritised and protected? We have seen the backlash against OfSTED after the tragic death of Ruth Perry.



Will this lead to a change in the way teachers and leaders in schools are treated? So far, progress has been slow in seeing such a change.

As a Local Authority, we will continue to look at ways we can attract the ever-diminishing pool of new recruits to come and work in West Sussex. We have had some success with the recruitment fairs we have run. However, to fundamentally address this pressing issue, there needs to be a national push for change. The Government, whatever its political complexion, needs to put education at the heart of its policies and address the supply, quality, and job satisfaction of the workforce. Unless and until this happens, we will see no improvement.