Changes in subject teaching time

NFER research on teacher retention has highlighted how both the accountability system and teacher supply are influencing changes in the teaching time secondary schools dedicate to different subjects. Jack Worth explains.

A number of different forces have influenced secondary schools’ allocation of curriculum time between different subjects over the last five years, including policy changes and a changing labour market for teachers. Three key forces have been:

- New accountability measures introduced by the government have provided schools with an incentive to particularly prioritise teaching of English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects. English, maths, science, history, geography and modern languages.
- School spending per-pupil has been stable in real terms, so increases in a particular subject area may have often meant reductions in other subjects (Belfield et al, 2017).
- Teacher supply in particular subjects has also acted as a constraint on the ability to expand or even maintain, the amount of teaching in some subjects.

Disentangling what effect each of these factors has had on the curriculum is a challenge because all three are influencing changes in teaching time secondary schools’ offer science teaching to fill EBacc slots. However, total curriculum hours have been unchanged since 2011. This could be because schools had smaller classes which they have filled up, and school and pupil preferences may still be influencing this trend. It may also be that low recruitment and retention rates have limited schools’ ability to expand science teaching hours.

Our analysis of teacher retention rates found that science and maths teachers have the highest rates of leaving the profession and that rates of leaving are particularly high in the first few years after training.

Better employment prospects outside of teaching for those with training in a STEM subject are likely to raise the leaving rate, but other subject-specific factors may also have an influence. Teacher training entries for science subjects in England have consistently been below the government’s target for the last few years (DfE, 2016).

Curriculum time for technology subjects has fallen dramatically since 2011. We found that technology teachers have a higher leaving rate, which may be driven by schools’ reduced demand for teachers as well as teachers’ own career decisions.

We also found that the leaving rate for early-career teachers of technology subjects is below average, whereas the rate for those with more than five years’ experience is above average.

This may also be a sign that schools have been looking to reduce expenditure on teaching technology, since experienced teachers are more expensive to employ. However, it could also be a sign of schools preferring teachers with more up-to-date subject knowledge.

School budgets are expected to fall in real terms over the next few years (Belfield et al, 2017) and Progress 8 will continue to be the main accountability measure for secondary schools.

Therefore, unless they are protected, other non-EBacc subjects that have not seen such large falls in curriculum time, particularly arts subjects, may see reductions in teaching time and staff numbers over the next few years.

Jack Worth is a senior economist at the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Further information
- The research update Teacher Retention and Turnover is available at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NUFS01
- To find out more about this research project or to register your interest, visit www.nfer.ac.uk/research/teaching-workforce-dynamics/

References
- Jack Worth is a senior economist at the National Foundation for Educational Research.

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Source: NFER analysis of School Workforce Census data

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