



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

Report

Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention

National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)



Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention

Sarah Lynch
Jack Worth
Susan Bamford
Karen Wespieser

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The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ
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All views expressed in the report are those of the authors.

1 Introduction

Recruiting and retaining enough teachers to serve growing numbers of pupils is one of the key challenges currently facing education in England. Much of the analysis and commentary to date has focused on how many teachers say they plan to leave, and presents a negative view of the experiences of many. [‘Should I Stay or Should I Go? NFER analysis of teachers joining and leaving the profession’](#), published in November 2015, provided new analysis that shed light on the numbers of teachers who actually leave, and where they go.

This follow-up research aims to better understand the experiences and intentions of teachers. It explores how engaged and supported teachers feel, tracks this over time, and analyses how this relates to their intention to remain or to leave the profession. It is based on data collected from four rounds of NFER’s nationally representative Teacher Voice survey, in June and November 2015 and March and May 2016, and on 21 in-depth interviews with teachers who have recently left or are considering leaving the state sector.¹ This latest analysis provides a more nuanced picture of teacher retention, and how this might be supported in future. Further methodological details about both the quantitative and qualitative data collection can be found in the [methodology](#) at the end of this report.

¹ The teachers interviewed were recruited via social media and are therefore not necessarily representative of the whole teaching profession, and we did not interview a comparison group of teachers not considering leaving. The approach nevertheless provides important insights into why teachers are leaving.

2 At a glance

The majority of teachers are *not* considering leaving the profession. Half of teachers are “engaged”, a third seem more ambivalent, but only a minority are “disengaged”.

The proportion of teachers *considering* leaving has, however, increased significantly in the last year, from 17 to 23 per cent. While smaller proportions *actually leave* the profession (ten per cent in 2015 including retirees), this figure has increased in recent years, suggesting that retention pressures are growing.

Protective factors found to be associated with retention include job satisfaction, having adequate resources, reward and recognition, and being well supported by management.

There is a strong interaction between teacher engagement and retention. Most (90 per cent) engaged teachers are not considering leaving, compared with 26 per cent of disengaged teachers. However, ten per cent of engaged teachers are considering leaving the profession.

Engagement underpins retention rates. Maths teachers and senior leaders have high levels of engagement and are less likely to be considering leaving. Conversely, science teachers and experienced male teachers have a heightened risk of leaving, especially after controlling for their level of engagement.

We found no evidence of any influence of a school’s proportion of free school meal pupils, academy status, or region on intent to leave the profession.

3 The story so far

The issues relating to teacher supply are complex. The demand for teachers is expected to grow, while relatively benign wider economic conditions have had an impact on the pipeline of new teachers. The key trends in the current teacher supply challenge are:

- **Teacher numbers continue to grow.** Although around ten per cent of teachers leave each year nationally, they are generally being replaced by new entrants. The overall number of teachers increased again in 2015 (although the picture varied by phase). There were a record number of 456,000 full-time equivalent teachers in state-funded schools in 2015.
- **Retaining working-age teachers is becoming harder.** The proportion of teachers leaving for reasons other than retirement increased from six per cent of teachers in 2011 to eight per cent in 2015 (see Figure 1). Overall, this has been offset by a reduction in the number of teachers retiring, but retention pressures seem to be growing.
- **The number of teachers entering initial teacher training has been below the government's annual target for four years.** The government's Teacher Supply Model (TSM) estimates how many new entrants to teacher training programmes are likely to be needed to fill future vacancies that arise because of changes in teacher demand and supply. The number of new trainees has been particularly below target in certain subjects, such as maths and physics.

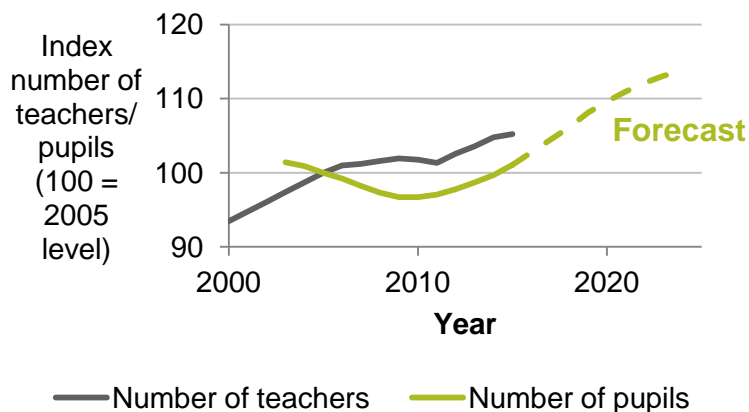
Figure 1. The proportion of non-retiring teachers leaving the profession has risen since 2011



Source: [School Workforce Census](#)

- **Pupil numbers are forecast to rise, so more teachers will be needed in future.** The number of pupils is projected to grow by 13 per cent between 2015 and 2024, adding another 900,000 pupils to the school system over the next decade (see Figure 2 overleaf). This growth will increase the demand for teachers.

Figure 2. More teachers are needed to meet future demand



Note vertical axis does not start at zero.

Sources: [School Workforce Census](#) and [National Pupil Projections](#)

- **Secondary schools face particular challenges.** Secondary schools are facing the fastest growth in pupil numbers over the next decade, particular shortfalls in the number of entrants to teacher training, and more teachers leaving than joining over the past two years. Some EBacc subjects, such as sciences, languages, and geography, face particular challenges.

NFER's [Should I Stay or Should I Go?](#) report, published in November 2015, provided new analysis that shed light on the numbers of teachers who actually leave, and where they go. The analysis found that:

- **Teacher intent to leave does not always result in them actually leaving.** The proportion of teachers considering leaving is much higher than the proportion that actually leave.

- **More than half of the teachers that actually leave state schools take up jobs in the education sector.** The most common destinations include teaching in private schools, becoming teaching assistants and taking up a non-teaching role in a school.
- **Teachers are not leaving for higher-paid jobs**, at least not in the short term. On average they experience a ten per cent fall in wages compared to similar teachers who remain in teaching.

Many of the policy interventions and analyses to date have focused on teacher recruitment. There have been changes to initial teacher training, a package of initiatives to attract maths and physics teachers and a programme to attract returning teachers back into the profession. At a time when trainee targets are being missed, retaining the teachers already in the profession becomes all the more important, yet far less attention has been paid to retaining teachers currently employed in state schools.

In its February 2016 report *Training New Teachers*, the National Audit Office called on the Department for Education to '*show that the arrangements [for training new teachers] are more cost-effective than alternative expenditure, for instance on improving retention*'. Recent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on *The Longer-Term Costs and Benefits of Different Initial Teacher Training Routes* has highlighted how costly low retention rates are for the education system in the long term, given the cost of training new teachers to replace them. With this important issue in mind, NFER has undertaken further analysis to better understand the experiences, intentions and motivations of teachers.

4 Are teachers thinking about leaving?

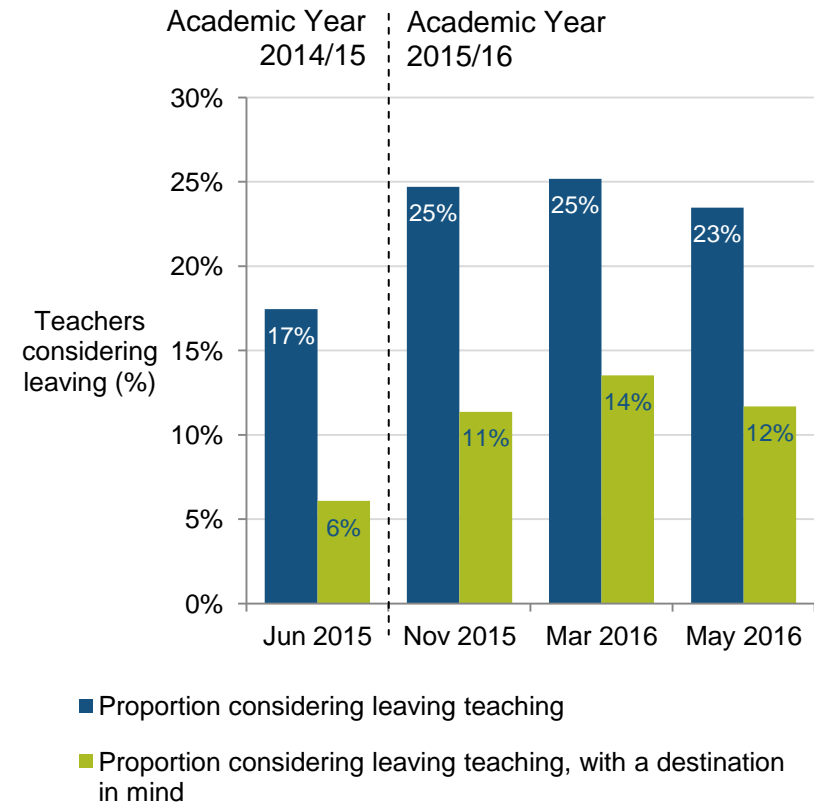
Key findings

- The majority of teachers are *not* considering leaving the profession. The proportion of teachers who are considering leaving has, however, increased significantly in the last year.
- Smaller proportions of teachers have an alternative destination in mind or are active in their search for another job, yet these proportions have also increased in the last year.

In the four Teacher Voice surveys carried out over a 12-month period (June 2015 - May 2016), we asked a representative sample of teachers in England whether they were considering leaving teaching in the next 12 months. As our focus was on how best to retain teachers in the profession, teachers who were about to retire or go on parental leave were excluded from the analysis.

The majority of teachers (60 per cent of respondents across all four surveys) are *not* considering leaving their role. However, as shown in Figure 3, the proportion of teachers who are considering leaving increased significantly between the end of the 2014/15 academic year (June) and the first term of the 2015/16 academic year (November). As shown in the blue bars in Figure 3, the proportion increased from 17 per cent to 25 per cent and then remained around that level.

Figure 3. The proportion of teachers considering leaving has increased significantly



Source NFER Teacher Voice.

The timing of the surveys and possible seasonal effects may have an impact on trends. For example, the last survey took place just *prior* to the end of May, which is a common resignation point for teachers. This might inflate the proportion considering leaving, but could then be offset by fewer teachers considering leaving at the end of an academic year as they near the summer break. Despite these caveats, the increase in the proportion considering leaving between the two academic years is *statistically significant*.

Is the pace of policy reform having an effect?

Was the 2015-16 academic year atypical in terms of policy reform? Interviews with a sample of teachers indicated that the pace of reform is a contributing factor. As one former primary teacher put it, *'the goalposts are constantly changing'*.

For example, our November 2015 survey was carried out shortly after the introduction of the new Common Inspection Framework, the launch of reformed maths and English GCSEs (which set higher expectations), and the 2014 National Curriculum for most subjects coming into force in all year groups - all happening from September 2015. Alongside these particular policy changes, those interviewed also referred to the earlier reform to teachers' pay (pay progression has been performance-related since September 2013).

There is a perception that the rate of policy change has contributed to an increasing workload. As one former secondary maths teacher said, *'confusing policy changes don't help workload'*. See Section 7 for more discussion on *why* teachers in our sample are leaving.

Teachers considering leaving are more decided about their destinations and more active in their search for another job

We know from the School Workforce Census that the proportion of teachers who actually leave the profession is smaller than those who say they intend to leave. However, as Figure 1 shows, the proportion of teachers leaving and not retiring has increased in recent years (from six per cent in 2011 to eight per cent in 2015²).

Similarly, while the proportion who *also* have a clear destination in mind (see the green bars in Figure 3) is smaller than those who say they plan to leave, this too has increased from six per cent in June 2015 to 14 per cent in March 2016. The proportion then dropped to 12 per cent in May 2016, but still remained higher than in June 2015. Furthermore, a similar proportion (12 per cent) are considering leaving and are also *actively searching* for another job.

Our earlier analysis of the Labour Force Survey (Worth et al., 2015) showed that more than half of teachers who left teaching in the state sector took up jobs in the wider school sector, including teaching in private schools, becoming teaching assistants, and taking up non-teaching roles in schools. Similarly, among our interviewees who had left teaching in the state sector, some are teaching in independent schools or in other countries, working for education charities, working for the local authority, or doing 'casual tutoring'. This could serve as a 'career break' opportunity, whilst maintaining links with the sector. The following sections explore the factors affecting the changing rates of retention.

² Source: [School Workforce Census](#)

5 Can staff engagement affect retention?

Key findings

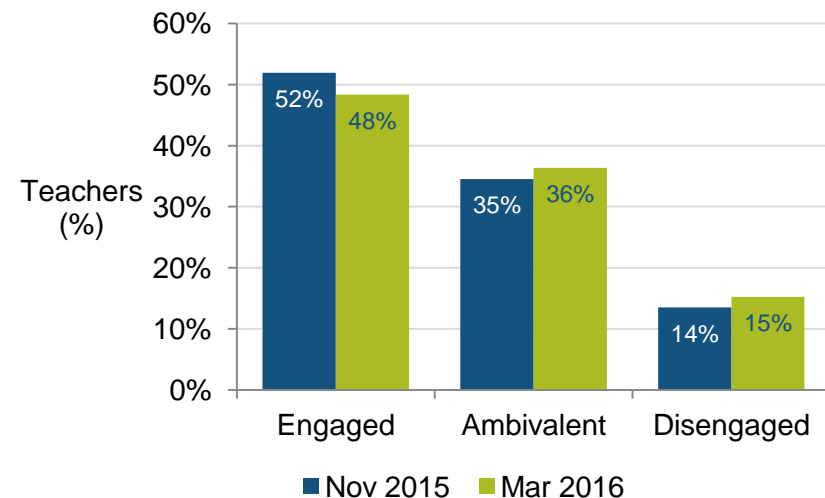
- Half of teachers are engaged in their role in the state sector, a third seem more ambivalent, but only a minority are disengaged.
- There is a relationship between teacher engagement and retention. Most (90 per cent) of the engaged teachers are *not* considering leaving, compared with only a quarter of disengaged teachers.
- Ten per cent of engaged teachers are considering leaving the profession.

We have explored the relationship between teachers' engagement in their role and whether they are considering leaving the profession. In November 2015 and March 2016, all teachers responding to the NFER Teacher Voice survey were asked about the extent to which they agreed with 16 statements about their job and their school. They related to leadership, reward and recognition, resources, school culture and ethos, and their own professional development. We derived a measure of overall staff engagement from the 16 statements using the statistical technique called factor analysis. Teachers were categorised as 'engaged', 'disengaged' or 'neither engaged nor disengaged' (this third group are labelled as 'ambivalent' in the discussions that follow; see the [methodology](#) for further details).

Around half of teachers are engaged in their role

Many of the teachers we interviewed made positive comments about teaching, including '*I adore teaching, I love it*' (primary teacher considering leaving) and '*it was my passion...I was doing what I really liked*' (former secondary headteacher), despite still considering leaving or having already left teaching. Figure 4 shows that around half of teachers are engaged, a third seemed more ambivalent, while only a minority of teachers are disengaged.

Figure 4. Most teachers are engaged

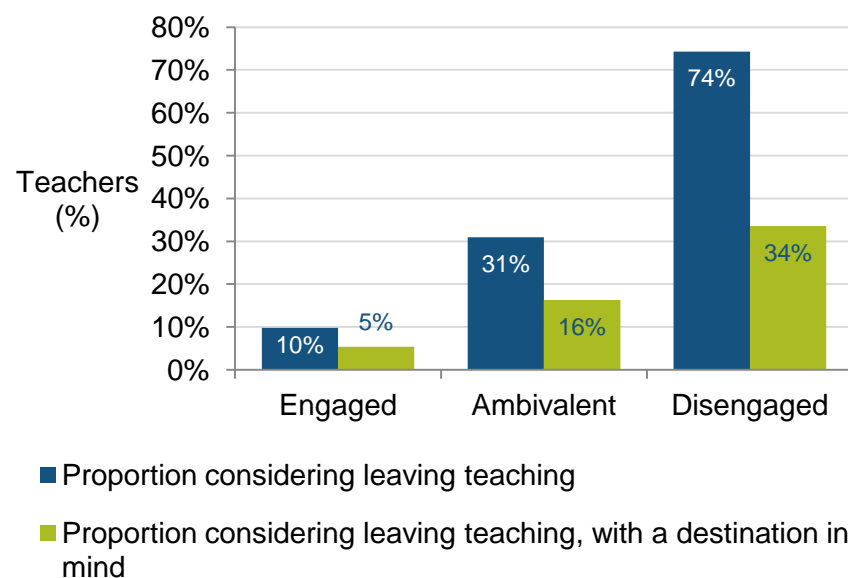


Source: Teachers responding to NFER Teacher Voice November and March

The more engaged teachers are, the less likely they are to consider leaving

There is a relationship between engagement and desire to leave. Most (90 per cent) of the engaged teachers are *not* considering leaving, compared with only a quarter of disengaged teachers.³ But not all teachers fitted this pattern. Ten per cent of engaged teachers are considering leaving, and five per cent had also identified an alternative destination, so seem more certain about their decision.

Figure 5. There is a relationship between engagement and desire to leave



Source: Teachers responding to NFER Teacher Voice November and March

³ Note that this analysis does not control for other underlying factors that could influence intent to leave (see Section 6 for more in-depth analysis).

Among the sample of teachers we interviewed, there are many who appeared to be engaged with their role but the perceived pressure had *'taken its toll'* (secondary maths teacher considering leaving). As one primary teacher clarified, *'It's not a decision against teaching, it's a decision against working in this context... the workload, the impact on my life...'*.

Losing engaged teachers could be a serious problem for the sector, particularly given research evidence of the relationship between engagement factors (including job satisfaction, school culture and a supportive context), teacher quality and student outcomes (see, for example, Fleche 2016 and Johnson, Kraft and Papay, 2011). Effort should be targeted at keeping the engaged teachers feeling valued and satisfied in their roles.

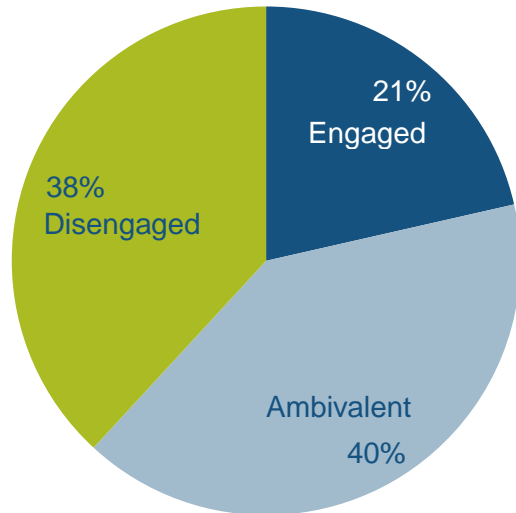
Re-engaging ambivalent teachers could help teacher retention

A third of ambivalent teachers are considering leaving (see Figure 5), and as a third of teachers overall made up this group, that is approximately ten per cent of teachers who could potentially be retained if re-engaged.

A quarter of disengaged teachers have no intention of leaving

It is perhaps not surprising that three-quarters of the disengaged teachers are considering leaving (see Figure 5). Given the research evidence of the relationship between engagement factors and teacher quality, it may not be a negative consequence for the teaching profession if disengaged teachers leave. However, there could be opportunities within the sector to re-engage this group.

Figure 6. Most of the teachers considering leaving are in fact *not* disengaged



Source: Teachers responding to NFER Teacher Voice November and March

Many (61 per cent) teachers who are considering leaving are not disengaged from teaching (see Figure 6).

Effort needs to be made to understand the different groups and what could help retain them. The following section explores in more detail how engagement can be an important mediating factor that underpins differences we see in retention rates for different types of teachers.

6 Which teachers are thinking about leaving?

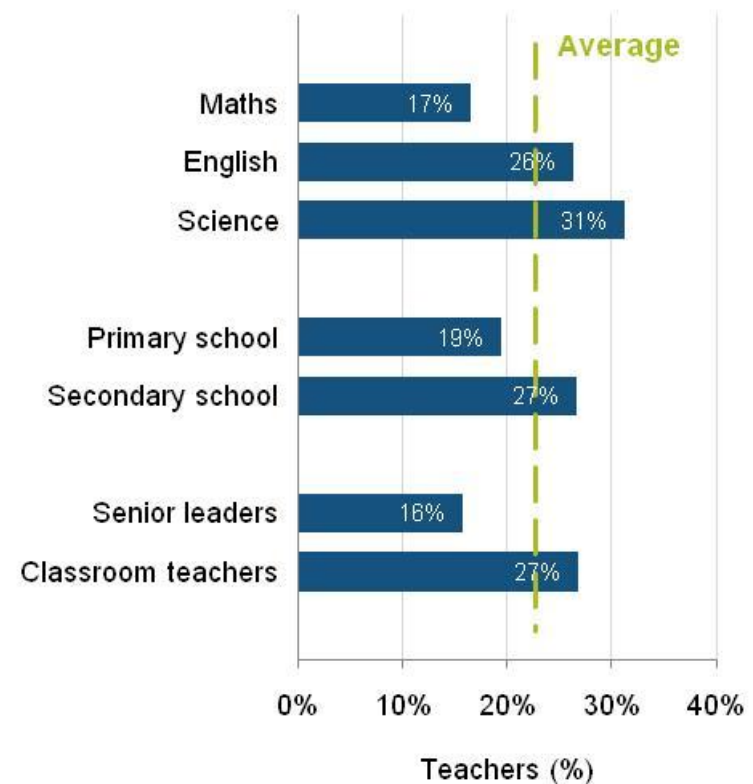
Key findings

- Engagement is an important factor mediating retention rates among different types of teacher.
- Maths teachers and senior leaders have high levels of engagement and less likelihood of leaving. Science teachers and secondary school teachers have higher likelihood of leaving.
- There are underlying factors not captured in our data that increase the likelihood of leaving for some groups after engagement is accounted for, particularly science teachers.
- We found no evidence of any influence of a school's proportion of free school meal pupils, academy status, or region on intent to leave the profession.

Just under a quarter of teachers in our survey said they are considering leaving teaching. Their intent to leave is affected by a range of other factors alongside engagement (explored in Section 5). We carried out some basic descriptive analysis to explore the relationship between intention to leave teaching and teacher characteristics. Figure 7 shows that the proportion of teachers considering leaving varies according to type of teacher.

Secondary school teachers and science teachers are significantly *more likely* to be considering leaving, whereas senior leaders and maths teachers are *less likely* than others to be considering leaving. We found no evidence of any influence of academy status on teachers' intent to leave.

Figure 7. The proportion of teachers considering leaving depends on their characteristics



Source: NFER Teacher Voice Survey

Controlling for underlying factors that could influence intent to leave...

The analysis above in Figure 7 does not control for other underlying factors that could influence intent to leave and it is possible that many factors, including engagement, are inter-related. For example, can differences between primary and secondary school teachers' intent to leave be explained by one of the other factors we have identified, such as differences in their levels of engagement?

We used logistic regression modelling to address these questions, considering teachers' role, subject, years of teaching experience, gender, and the type, region and level of deprivation among pupils in their school. Holding all other factors constant:

- maths teachers are significantly *less likely* than secondary non-EBacc subject teachers to be considering leaving
- senior leaders are significantly *less likely* to be considering leaving than classroom teachers
- male teachers with more than five years teaching experience are significantly *more likely* to be considering leaving.

No other characteristics are statistically significant (for example, we found no evidence of any influence of school-level free school meals, academy status, or region, on intent to leave teaching). It is also notable that, in contrast to our previous basic descriptive analysis (Figure 7) where primary school teachers were significantly less likely to be considering leaving, our logistic regression model shows this is not the case. This is because the difference previously identified can be explained by other factors (for example, lower

numbers of men with five years experience working in the primary sector).

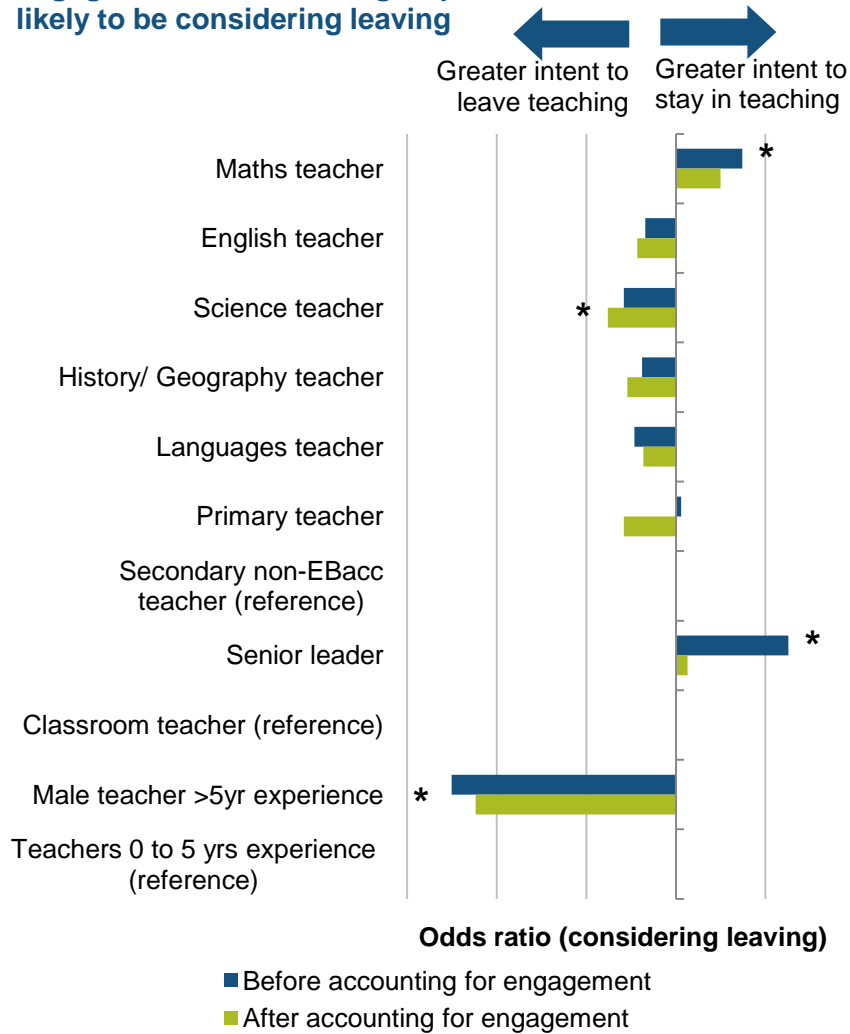
Exploring this further, taking account of teachers' level of engagement...

There is a strong relationship between staff engagement and whether a teacher is considering leaving (see Section 5/Figure 5), which suggests that engagement is an important mediating factor that underpins the differences we see in the retention rates of teachers with different personal or school-related characteristics, and is an issue which needs to be better understood by the sector.

We also found that levels of engagement vary by type of teacher, and so this is likely to further explain their intent to leave. For example, the types of teachers our earlier analysis found less likely to consider leaving are also more highly engaged (maths teachers and senior leaders). Similarly, those who our earlier analysis found more likely to consider leaving have lower levels of engagement (such as teachers with more than five years of teaching experience). In addition, we found that primary teachers had significantly higher levels of engagement than secondary non-EBacc teachers.

Figure 8 compares the likelihood of considering leaving teaching for teachers of different subjects (compared to secondary non-EBacc teachers), and for senior leaders compared to classroom teachers, before and after accounting for different levels of engagement.

Figure 8. Accounting for teachers' level of engagement alters which groups are most likely to be considering leaving



*Statistically significant. Source: NFER Teacher Voice Survey. Note: X axis uses a logarithmic scale

The role of engagement in mediating teachers' motivations suggests there should be a targeted approach to retention among high-risk groups

Some characteristics are linked to higher likelihood of considering leaving, but this is largely explained by a lower level of engagement. For example, classroom teachers tend to be more likely than senior leaders to consider leaving, but there is no difference once their lower level of engagement is accounted for. This implies that their lower retention rates could therefore be improved by identifying and addressing the root causes of their lower engagement.

Our analysis reveals some teacher characteristics that are linked to a heightened risk of leaving, *especially after accounting for how engaged those teachers are*. Improving these teachers' engagement is still likely to lead to their retention improving. However, there must be other factors at work to explain our finding that even for two equally engaged teachers, those from some groups still have greater intention to leave. These groups may require targeted attention beyond the school level to address their increased likelihood of considering leaving, over and above their level of engagement.

Science teachers are significantly more likely to be considering leaving teaching than secondary non-EBacc subject teachers, after accounting for their relatively high level of engagement. This suggests that their levels of engagement are acting as a protective factor, but there are other underlying factors that affect the retention of science teachers over and above how engaged they are with teaching. This may be related to their specific skills being highly valued in the labour market outside of teaching.

Our analysis has also identified **male teachers with more than five years of teaching experience** as a group that have heightened risk of leaving (after controlling for their lower level of engagement, they remain more likely to consider leaving). This suggests that, for this group, both levels of engagement *and* other underlying factors are at work. See an example from our interview sample in Case A. More in-depth research into the motivations of this group would be needed to identify the reasons for their intentions.

Case A. Experienced male teacher

Mr A had been a science teacher for over ten years; most recently he was assistant head in a challenging school in a deprived area. He told us about too much pressure, without enough flexibility and support, impacting on his family and well-being. He took a £20,000 pay cut and '*a massive step back*' and is now a classroom teacher in an independent school.

Prior to taking level of engagement into account, **primary school teachers** are as likely as secondary non-EBacc teachers to be considering leaving. However, after taking primary school teachers' (relatively high) levels of engagement into account, the likelihood of leaving then increases so that, in contrast to our initial analysis, primary teachers appear *more* likely to intend to leave (although the difference is not statistically significant). Again, this suggests that there are other factors at work not captured by our quantitative

data, and which are offset by higher levels of engagement and a different mix of types of teacher in the primary sector.

There are examples of primary school teachers among our interview sample who had been passionate about teaching but had left the profession partly because of a dislike of the primary curriculum. As one commented, '*my personal dream is to see a more play-based curriculum*'. Another ex-primary teacher said the new curriculum has made lessons '*uninteresting*'.

The central finding from this analysis of the interplay between retention, engagement and teacher and school characteristics is that engagement is an important mediating factor for retention for some groups and underpins many of the differences between types of teacher and their intention of leaving. However, our analysis also suggests that there other underlying factors affecting the intentions of different groups which warrant further investigation.

Attention should be focused on developing approaches to retaining groups with a heightened risk of leaving that are targeted according to the differing drivers we have identified.

7 Why are teachers leaving?

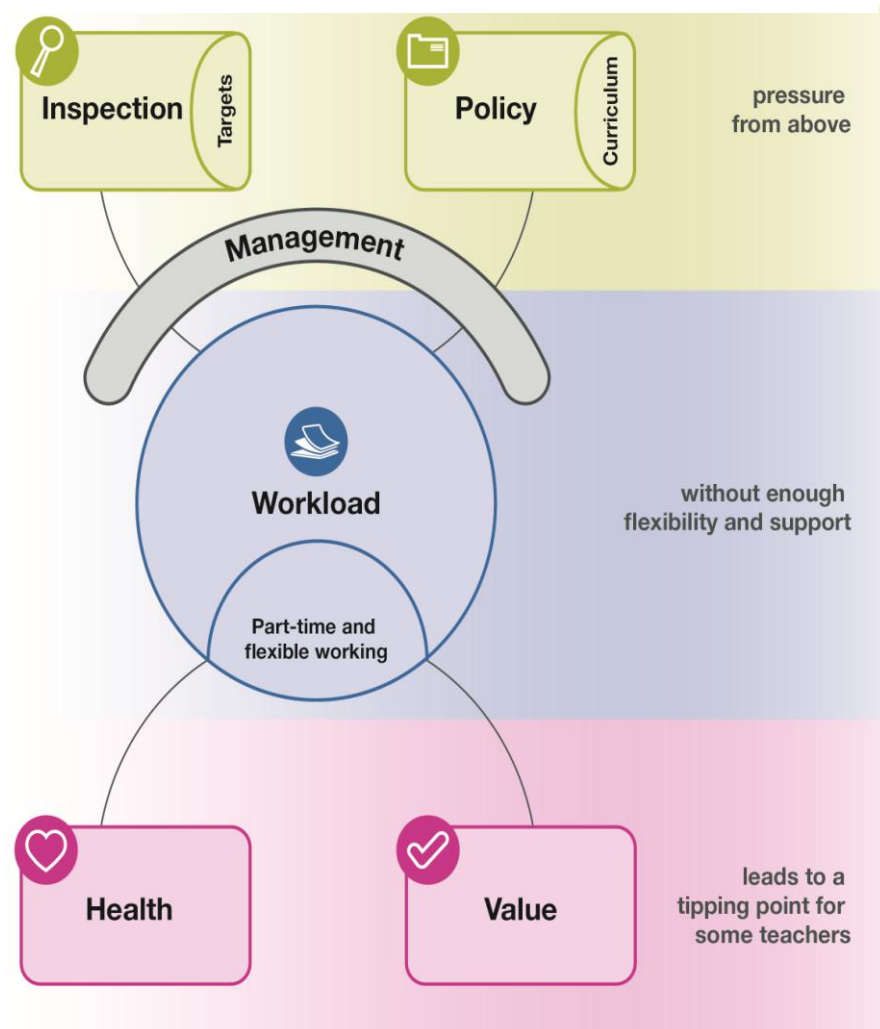
Key findings

- In our 21 interviews, workload is at the centre of why teachers are considering leaving. This is often perceived to stem from two main drivers – policy and inspection.
- According to interviewees, a high workload is associated with two other negative outcomes – poor health or feeling undervalued – which leads to teachers wanting to leave.

It is challenging to secure interviews with teachers at the point of leaving, so we recruited via social media. This resulted in a sample of 21 people, ten of whom are considering leaving and 11 of whom had recently left. As this is a small, self-selecting sample, and as we did not interview a comparison group of teachers not considering leaving, these views cannot be taken as representative of the teaching profession as a whole. The findings nevertheless provide interesting insights into some of the reasons why teachers might leave the profession, and could form the basis for further investigation.

There was a high degree of consensus among the 21 teachers we interviewed. Our sample included an equal number of primary and secondary teachers, and a spread of experience, yet the stories they shared are remarkably similar. Although workload lays at the centre of their stories, it is too simplistic to focus solely on workload as the reason these teachers decided to leave.

Figure 9. Why are teachers leaving?



As shown in Figure 9, our analysis uncovered two main drivers that interviewees feel are responsible for increased workload, namely inspection and policy changes. Workload is then identified as a causal factor in two negative outcomes – poor health and feeling undervalued – which led to these interviewees wanting to leave the profession.

Pressure from above...

The teachers we interviewed said they wanted more non-teaching time to plan, to reflect on their own practices and to learn from others. Managing workload had, in their view, prevented them from having any spare time for effective planning and reflection.

Teachers told us about the ‘*pace of reform*’ contributing to workload – the time it took to manage change, particularly when it involved the curriculum. Case B is typical of some of the concerns that are expressed. Alongside policy change, some teachers told us about the pressure to meet measures in the Ofsted inspection framework, in both challenging and successful schools. Related to this, teachers commented on the workload associated with gathering evidence against Ofsted-related measures, or performance targets for their own pay review. They felt that too much marking is required as part of the evidence trail.

...without enough support and flexibility...

Senior leaders and governors are identified as having an important role in protecting teachers from pressures from above, yet among

the teachers we spoke to, this is not always taking place, as illustrated by Case C.

Case B. Pressure from above

Mrs B had been a primary school teacher for seven years. She took maternity leave in 2014 and had been considering leaving the profession since returning part-time in September 2015.

She explained that when she returned from maternity leave her priorities were different. She emphasised that she loved teaching but felt that it was ‘*ridiculously hard to keep on top of [policy changes]... I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to be doing and not really sure if I'm doing it right*’.

Mrs B was genuinely distressed at the thought of leaving and emphasised that ‘*It's not an easy decision. It's not a decision against teaching; it's a decision against working in this context.... I adore teaching, I love it.*

In some cases, our interviewees admitted that they had not asked for support. They gave two main reasons for this, firstly a recognition that leaders are under pressure too, as one primary teacher explained: ‘*The pressures for people in leadership are so great it puts a lot more pressure on people lower down*’. Secondly, some interviewees feared appearing weak if they sought support.

As another primary teacher said: *'In teaching, it is culturally unacceptable to show a chink of weakness that you are even considering leaving the profession'*. Note that support from management is identified as a significant protective factor for retention in the quantitative analysis (see Section 8).

Case C. Without enough support and flexibility

Miss C had been a primary school teacher for six years. She thought about leaving a lot, especially in the last two years, and told us that *'teaching is not a sustainable job'*. She had only ever taught in one school so did not know whether to *'risk'* trying a different school or if she should leave the profession altogether. She had spoken to her team leader about her concerns but rather than receiving coaching or support was told that *'you just have to do what's right for you'*. She reflected that *'Teachers try to do the best for everyone but that can mean not doing the right thing for yourself'*.

A small proportion of our sample are employed part-time, but it is not always working effectively. As one primary teacher reported: *'If there had been time to plan together [with the job share] then it might have changed how I felt and possibly have meant I was still teaching'*. She was still working long hours: *'...when you are doing evening working on your working days and your non-working days then it starts to feel like you are doing more than you are paid for'*.

...leads to a tipping point for some

Many of our 21 teachers reported that they did not feel valued or rewarded sufficiently for their efforts, by government or leaders in their schools. They felt that this negative attitude towards teachers filtered down to parents and pupils too. A lack of feeling valued was mentioned by more experienced classroom teachers. This is shown in Case D – an experienced teacher who did not wish to move into senior management. A few of the former teachers we spoke to described reaching a tipping point that pre-empted their decision to leave, including suffering from stress-related illness. For example, a former secondary maths teacher explained: *'It took its toll. I had a collapse... and bit of a breakdown'*.

Case D. Leads to a tipping point for some teachers

Mrs D had been a secondary history teacher for 14 years, and most recently held a middle management position as head of humanities. She left the state sector in February 2016. Mrs D explained:

More is expected of teachers for less reward. Many teachers feel that they cannot do enough, that whatever your best efforts are they will never be good enough. There's an ever-increasing amount expected of you for ever-decreasing rewards'.

Since leaving, she felt her mental health had improved. In August she is taking up a role teaching abroad.

8 What are the protective factors?

Key findings

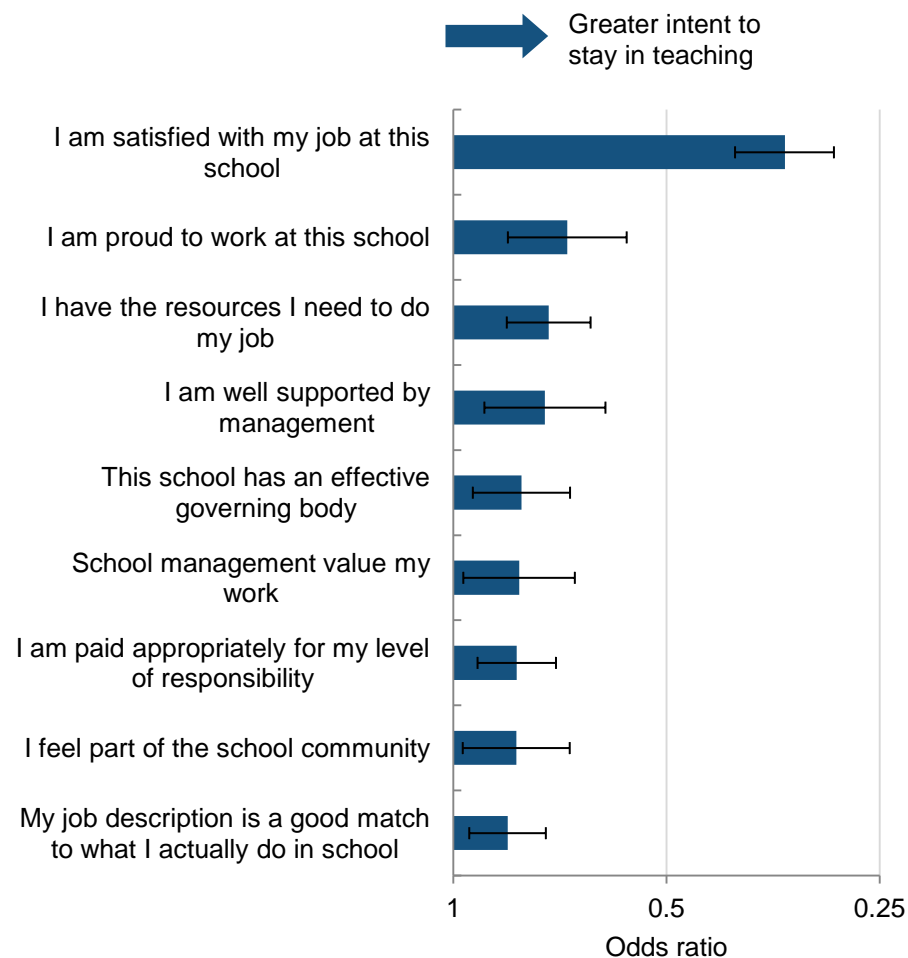
- The strongest protective factor for teacher retention is job satisfaction.
- Having adequate resources, appropriate pay, being well-supported by management, and having an effective governing body are also strong predictors for retention.

We explored which of the survey items had a particularly strong association with whether a teacher is considering leaving, to identify the critical factors for improving retention. We extended our logistic regression model to identify which of the factors that make up the NFER engagement measure are significantly associated with reduced intention to leave teaching, holding all else constant. Factors that are significantly associated with **intent to stay** in the profession could be labelled as ‘**protective factors**’, worthy of attention among school leaders and policymakers.

Unsurprisingly, we found that by far the strongest predictor is ‘job satisfaction’. Among the other factors, the strongest predictors are:

- being proud to work at the school
- having adequate resources
- being well supported and valued by school management
- having an effective governing body
- appropriate pay for level of responsibility.

Figure 10. Protective factors



Source: Teachers responding to NFER Teacher Voice November and March

This suggests that **recognition and reward** could be effective for retention. While **receiving appropriate pay for their level of responsibility** is a protective factor for teachers, other evidence suggests that pay is not the *main* motivating factor. Our earlier research showed that teachers leaving the profession saw a wage reduction of ten per cent on average after one year, suggesting higher paid jobs outside of teaching are not a strong incentive for teachers (Worth *et al.*, 2015), at least in the short term. However, Allen *et al.* (2016) found lower retention rates in areas with higher wages outside of teaching, suggesting a buoyant outside labour market encourages teachers to leave. This is supported by our interviewees. For example one former secondary teacher told us ‘*pay is not good enough for teachers in London*’, whilst a primary teacher considering leaving her role in the North East explained:

My teaching wage is very good, I can live relatively comfortably and support my family... jobs I look at I'd be looking at least a 25 per cent pay cut. The financial impact would be massive.

A number of teachers we interviewed agreed that pay is not necessarily an important influence on their motivation, or decision, to leave. However many did highlight that longer-term pay progression is more challenging: ‘*the pay is not bad... [but not] fantastic thinking long term*’ (former secondary maths teacher).

Other forms of reward and recognition may be effective, to make teachers feel more valued in the profession. Teachers we spoke to had ideas such as ‘*paying off student debt*’ (former secondary maths teacher) and ‘*subsidising childcare costs for teacher*’ (former primary teacher).

Being well-supported and valued by school management is also identified by the regression analysis as a protective factor. This is reiterated by those we interviewed (discussed in Section 7) who also talked about the role of **senior leaders and governors in supporting and protecting teachers**.

Several engagement factors are *not* significantly associated with a greater desire to leave or stay. However, these factors may well be related to job satisfaction (the most significant protective factor against considering leaving) or they may simply be factors that all staff, whether considering leaving or not, are content with. These included:

- the school providing appropriately for a teacher’s professional development
- feeling informed about what is happening at school
- knowing how to contribute to the school’s goals.

9 Recommendations to improve retention

Our latest research shows that, although a majority of teachers are *not* considering leaving, proportions with intent to leave have increased in the last year. This could be costly for the education system in the long term in replacing them if they decide to leave. Retention pressures are growing and must be addressed in future, as pupil numbers are increasing and demand for teachers is expected to grow.

Our findings show that there is a relationship between retention, engagement, and teacher and school characteristics. Identifying and addressing the causes of low engagement among classroom teachers could be critical for their retention. For others (such as science teachers and experienced male teachers) there is a heightened risk of leaving, and for them there should be a more targeted approach to keeping them in the profession.

Based on our latest evidence, we make a number of recommendations to those with a role in helping to retain the current teacher workforce.

Monitor teacher intentions and engagement

There should be more systematic monitoring of teacher engagement and their future intentions, either informally or through more formal methods such as teacher surveys. For some groups of teachers with relatively low levels of engagement, retention rates could be improved by identifying the root causes of their low

engagement. Monitoring engagement would help to identify at-risk groups, their reasons for considering leaving, and what would motivate them to stay. Findings could inform the Teacher Supply Model, helping to better match the supply of new teachers to any anticipated gaps in the workforce.

Engage the workforce

For some groups of teachers, retention rates could be improved by addressing the causes of their dissatisfaction with teaching. Attention should be given to the protective factors found to be associated with retention, including job satisfaction, having adequate resources, reward (including appropriate pay but in other ways too) and recognition (to help teachers feel valued). These factors are likely to be important in maintaining engagement amongst motivated teachers and in re-engaging ambivalent teachers.

A more targeted approach to retention should be taken among high-risk groups identified by our research as more likely to consider leaving – namely science teachers, and men with more than five years of teaching experience.

Value and trust teachers

Methods of engaging the workforce need to take place within a positive narrative, to ensure teachers feel valued and are seen by others as such. Too many policies, too much negativity and too little support can lead to teachers feeling undervalued – an issue which they argue trickles down to parents and pupils too.

Provide clear messages

Whilst a significant amount of work has already taken place to ‘myth bust’ and address workload issues (including by Ofsted⁴), evidence from our interviews about why teachers are leaving suggests that these messages are not getting through. Further campaigns would therefore be helpful and could target particularly at-risk groups.

Support staff well-being

A greater focus should be placed on staff well-being. This could include schools having a governor or trustee responsible for staff welfare, or a member of the management team with specific time and responsibilities in this area. Mentoring and/or mental health provision could be beneficial for some staff.

School leaders – including governors and trustees – have a key role to play in protecting staff from what was described as a ‘*tsunami of change*’. This should include being able to distil policy without it becoming burdensome for staff.

Schools should consider how to implement flexible working opportunities effectively, to ensure that they benefit both teachers and the school.

Flexibility within and beyond school groups

School groups (such as Multi Academy Trusts) could explore whether teachers would be motivated and engaged by opportunities to move within the sector, rather than leave entirely. This could include secondments, so that teachers working in the most challenging schools get opportunities to work in other schools and – importantly – vice versa. It could also be worth considering flexible deployment of staff, so that teachers can share their working hours between different types of schools in a peripatetic manner

Teachers may value the opportunity of alternative career pathways, so that good teachers can stay in the classroom and have their skills recognised and shared across school groups, rather than taking up management positions on reduced timetables. This would need to be reflected through pay scales and professional development opportunities.

The findings and recommendations in this report highlight the focus should not just be on *recruitment* of teachers. Policy-makers, local authorities, multi-academy trusts, schools, and governing bodies can play an important role in helping to retain the current teacher workforce in state schools.

⁴See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015/ofsted-inspections-mythbusting>

10 Methodology

10.1 Quantitative analysis of Teacher Voice survey data

Data

The [Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey](#) is the largest representative panel survey of teachers in English schools. The surveys are run three times a year, in the autumn, spring and summer terms. Each survey is completed by at least 1000 primary and secondary school teachers from publicly-funded schools in England, including teachers from the full range of roles, from headteachers to newly qualified class teachers. The achieved sample in each round includes teachers from a good spread of schools by school level factors including geographical region, school type and eligibility for free school meals. Sample weighting is applied if necessary to ensure that the schools represented by our respondents are statistically representative of schools nationally.

Our analysis used longitudinal data from four Teacher Voice surveys, which were carried out in June 2015, November 2015, March 2016 and May 2016. A range of NFER-devised questions, summarised in Table 10.1, were asked across the four surveys including “Are you considering leaving teaching within the next academic year?”, which was asked at every time point.

Table 10.1

Variable	Questions asked in survey?			
	Jun 2015	Nov 2015	Mar 2016	May 2016
Are you considering leaving teaching within the next academic year?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
If yes, what will you do instead?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are you actively searching for another job?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Engagement questions	No	Yes	Yes	No
How many years of teaching experience do you have?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teacher and school characteristics (subject, role, school phase/type, proportion FSM, region)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of responses	1430	1382	1607	1466

An omnibus survey is sent to a panel of teachers that sign up to receive the survey once every term. In total, 2,303 individual teachers responded to at least one survey (see Table 10.2). Some (27%) responded to only one survey, others two or three and some (30%) responded to all four surveys. On average, teachers responded to 2.5 surveys.

Table 10.2

	Teachers	Responses
Responded to one survey	632	632
Responded to two surveys	451	902
Responded to three surveys	529	1587
Responded to four surveys	691	2764
Total	2,303	5,885

Definitions

Considering leaving the teaching profession

Teachers leave the profession for many different reasons, and this is reflected in the responses to our Teacher Voice survey. Among those considering leaving teaching in the next twelve months, intended destinations varied between retirement, maternity/paternity leave, a different job (within/outside the education sector), and undecided. The focus of our analysis is on understanding teachers' desires to leave that might be prevented by policy intervention or school practices. We therefore exclude those that are expecting to leave teaching in the next twelve months due to retirement and maternity, because their motivations for leaving are different from those we are interested in analysing. We also defined two further states of considering leaving:

- those that have a destination in mind – i.e. said they are considering leaving, but have a destination other than 'undecided';

- those that are considering leaving and are actively searching for a new job.

Teacher engagement

The NFER staff engagement measure is a summary measure calculated from the responses of members of school staff to several questions designed to measure how engaged they are with various aspects of school life (see Table A.3). The questions include their opinions of the school management, communication within the school, how satisfied they are with their job, opportunities for professional development, resources available to them and whether they feel part of the school community. Staff members are classified as 'engaged' if they give overall positive responses to the items included in the measure and 'disengaged' if their responses are negative overall. Table A.3 summarises the 2,988 responses to the staff engagement questions in our November 2015 and March 2016 Teacher Voice surveys.

The engagement measure is one of the measures in [NFER's General Staff Surveys](#), which a school can use to anonymously survey its staff. Other questions in the staff survey cover topics such as staff welfare, collaboration, professional development, performance management, school facilities and relationships with parents. Schools can use the surveys to get feedback on the various measures in comparison with all schools and can monitor changes from year to year.

Table A.3

How much do you agree with the following statements?	Agr (%)	Dis (%)	Nei (%)
I am satisfied with my job at this school	69	18	13
I feel part of the school community	84	7	9
My job description is a good match to what I actually do in school	65	22	13
I am proud to work at this school	84	4	12
I know how to contribute to the school's goals	90	3	7
I feel safe at this school	88	5	6
This school is run smoothly on a day to day basis	75	12	13
I am well supported by management	68	16	16
My opinions are listened to at this school	66	18	16
School management value my work	70	14	16
I am kept well informed about what is happening at this school	65	17	18
This school is well led	69	14	17
This school has an effective governing body	60	14	26
There is good support from colleagues for new staff at this school	81	7	12
The school provides appropriately for my professional development	64	16	20
I have the resources I need to do my job	62	20	18
* I am paid appropriately for my level of responsibility	61	25	15

Note: 'Agr' = Agree, 'Dis' =Disagree, represent total proportion of 'strongly (dis)agree' and '(dis)agree' responses. 'Nei' = Neither. * *'I am paid appropriately for my level of responsibility'* does not form part of the NFER staff engagement measure, but was added for this research project.

Analysis

We conducted logistic regression analysis of whether a teacher was considering leaving in the next twelve months, with a set of teacher and school characteristics as explanatory variables. We estimated one model with the engagement measure as a covariate (indicator variables for 'ambivalent' and 'disengaged', with 'engaged' as the reference category) and one without, to investigate the interplay between retention, engagement and teacher and school characteristics. The teacher and school characteristics we included as covariates were:

- March 2016 survey (reference category: November 2015 survey)
- Senior leader (ref: classroom teacher)
- Subject taught: Maths, English, Sciences (combined Physics, Chemistry, Biology, General Science), History/Geography, Language (combined French, German, Spanish, Languages), Primary (ref: secondary non-EBacc subject)
- Female (ref: male)
- Years of teaching experience: 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, more than 20 years (ref: 0-5 years)
- Interaction effects between female and years of experience.
- Academy school (ref: local authority-maintained school)
- Government office region (ref: North East)
- Quintile of school proportion FSM eligible (ref: 20% lowest FSM)

We took account of the fact that many of the responses to the November 2015 and March 2016 surveys were by the same

individual by clustering standard errors at the level of the individual. This ensures we are not overstating the amount of precision we are able to estimate our models with.

Limitations

We argued in our November 2015 report [‘Should I Stay or Should I Go? NFER analysis of teachers joining and leaving the profession’](#) that surveys typically report higher proportions of teachers who are planning to leave teaching than actually do leave in any given year. We demonstrated this by comparing the proportion considering leaving in our Teacher Voice survey (20%) and YouGov surveys for LKMco/Pearson (59%) and NUT (53%) with the proportion that actually left during the previous year according to the national school workforce statistics (10%). We should therefore not interpret our findings from Section 4 as representing a prediction of the proportion of teachers that are likely to leave teaching during the 2015/16 academic year. However, comparing responses to the same question sampled and surveyed in the same way over time may give an indication of how the actual proportion might change between the 2014/15 and 2015/16 academic years. The national statistics on the proportion of teachers leaving during the 2015/16 academic year will not be known until June or July 2017.

10.2 Qualitative analysis of in-depth teacher interviews

Teachers who had recently (in the past 18 months) left the state sector, or were considering leaving were recruited by social media in March 2016.

Participants were asked to complete a short recruitment questionnaire in order to establish:

- Whether they had left or were considering leaving;
- The phase they taught in (primary, secondary or special); and
- The length of time they had taught in the state sector.

Using this information, a sample of 21 respondents was selected for interview as shown in Table A.4.

Interviews took place during April 2016 and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Interviews were semi-structured and included the reasons the interviewee had left or was considering leaving and what could be done to encourage them to stay. Where interviewees gave permission we recorded the interviews to aid note-taking.

Table A.4 Interviewees

		Teachers considering leaving	Teachers who have left	Total
Primary	<5 years experience	0	2	10
	5-10 years experience	2	1	
	>10 years experience	3	2	
Secondary	<5 years experience	2	1	10
	5-10 years experience	0	1	
	>10 years experience	3	3	
Special			1	1
Total		10	11	

We used an Excel spreadsheet to summarise the interviews. This covered the main thematic areas. We added verbatim quotes to exemplify particular points and coded and categorised data to look for trends by phase, length of time they had taught and whether they had left.

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Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123
F: 01753 691632
E: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk
www.nfer.ac.uk

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