



National Foundation for
Educational Research

Research Digest

Summary of NFER's recent research



Issue 5, April 2026

About us

At NFER, our mission is to generate evidence and insights that can be used to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere, and to support positive change across education systems.

Our long history, vast experience and pioneering methods have established our reputation as an authoritative, trusted and respected voice in education. Today that reputation is enhanced with an unmatched depth and breadth of specialist education knowledge, talent and methodological expertise.

We use our expertise to produce high-quality, independent, research and insights to inform key decision makers about issues across the education system, including:

- Accountability
- Assessment
- Classroom Practice
- Education to Employment
- Social Mobility
- School Funding
- School Workforce
- Systems and Structures

Our clients include government departments and agencies at international, national and local levels, third sector organisations, private and public companies, employers and other organisations with an interest in education. They all benefit from the full range of our expert and professional services.

As an independent, not-for-profit organisation we invest any surplus funds directly back into our programme of research to address key questions in education and increase our impact and support for policy makers and practitioners.



The School Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report 2026

Published March 2026

This was the fourth in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the education workforce to monitor the progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

This report summarised the latest research and emerging trends in school teacher numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions. It also highlighted the policy actions most likely to deliver meaningful improvements to the challenges.

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Key Findings

1. Teacher numbers have increased in secondary and special schools, while primary teacher numbers are falling due to a decline in pupil numbers.
2. Over the last three years, recent teacher pay growth has slightly reduced the gap with average earnings but pay remains less competitive than in 2010/11. However, the Government's proposed 6.5 per cent increase over three years would likely mean teacher earnings still fall behind wider earnings growth.
3. Recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) is projected to improve in 2026/27 compared to previous years, despite some bursary cuts.
4. Unfilled vacancies and recruitment challenges remain high, though they have eased slightly since 2023.
5. Teacher retention has improved over the last two years, and exit rates among first-year early career teachers were the lowest ever recorded.
6. Teachers' working hours and perceptions of workload have improved modestly in recent years but remain less positive than those of comparable workers.

Recommendations

1. The School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) and the Government should aim to maintain the competitiveness of teachers' pay by ensuring it keeps pace with growth in average earnings outside teaching and by providing schools with the funding required to deliver this.
2. Given the importance of special schools and alternative provision (AP) in meeting the 6,500-teacher target, the Department for Education (DfE) should carry out more deliberate workforce planning for these sectors, as it does for primary and secondary teachers.
3. The Government should consider increasing bursaries for languages and arts subjects that are below their ITT targets, to support the implementation of the revised national curriculum and its associated changes to accountability measures.

Investigating job roles in the further education workforce

Published March 2026

This report, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, drew on the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC) to address the gap in understanding of the composition and structure of the further education (FE) workforce and provide a comprehensive quantitative assessment of the range of job roles in the FE workforce.

Key Findings

1. There is considerable variation in the job roles and sub-roles reported across colleges. Although most institutions are likely to require staff who perform broadly similar functions, this variation suggests an opportunity to increase consistency in how job roles are structured and described across the sector.
2. There is variation in salaries both within and across roles and sub-roles within the FE workforce. In 2022/23, median earnings (annualised and adjusted by FTE) vary widely from Instructors (£25,452) and Progress Tutors (£25,594) to Teachers (£34,875).
3. Salaries generally do not differ by subject taught, even though recruitment challenges vary significantly between subjects.
4. The FE teaching workforce is significantly older, far more likely to work part-time, and has a more balanced gender distribution compared with the secondary school teaching workforce.

Recommendations

1. Producing a clear and comprehensive set of job descriptions for roles in the FE workforce could be a first step towards achieving consistency in how job roles are structured and described across the sector.
2. There would be merit in further developing our understanding of how the Practitioner role varies across different providers due to practitioners typically earning less than Teachers and Lecturers in the FEWDC.
3. Government should address and prioritise better coverage of certain data fields and complete data for all providers.

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The Further Education Teacher Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

Published March 2026

This was the third in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the education workforce to monitor the progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

This report summarised the latest research and emerging trends in further education (FE) teacher numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions. It also highlighted the policy actions most likely to deliver meaningful improvements to the challenges.

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Key Findings

1. The FE sector is experiencing a significant shortage of teachers, although there have recently been some indications of improvement in all regions. In 2023/24, there were around 3,000 vacant FE teaching posts.
2. The number of 16- to 18-year-olds in England is projected to increase by seven per cent between 2023 and 2027. Therefore, FE providers will need to continue to recruit significantly more teachers over the coming years.
3. Compared with other groups, FE teachers' pay has fallen sharply in recent years. Since 2011, FE teacher pay has decreased by almost 20 per cent, while average UK earnings have increased by four per cent.
4. FE teachers do not seem to work unusually long hours, however, low pay and the lack of overtime opportunities may be contributing to their dissatisfaction with workload.
5. FE teaching plays a vital role in supplying the skills needed for the Government's priority sectors, but high vacancy rates in key subjects may hinder progress toward these ambitions.

Recommendations

1. The Government should provide funding that enables FE providers to offer higher pay for teachers. While recent announcements of new sector funding are necessary, a sustained effort over several years is needed.
2. Leaders in FE should consider how teachers can be meaningfully involved and engaged in the way the college or other provider defines its organisational development priorities and in wider decision-making.
3. The Department for Education (DfE) should begin publishing regular data on FE teacher retention rates as soon as possible, either through the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC) or, if that is not feasible, by using pension scheme data as it has done previously.

The School Support Staff Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

Published March 2026

This was the second in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on the education workforce to monitor the progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

This report summarised the latest research and emerging trends in school support staff workforce numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions. It also highlighted the policy actions most likely to deliver meaningful improvements to the challenges.

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This page was updated on the 29th September 2026 following an update to The School Support Staff Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

Key Findings

1. The proportion of leaders who said they found it difficult to recruit teaching assistants (TAs) was larger than the proportion of leaders who said they found it difficult to recruit teachers. Although recruitment has improved since 2023, three in four school leaders surveyed still reported difficulty recruiting TAs in 2025.
2. Among support staff considering leaving their jobs, the most common reason is not feeling valued, alongside low morale, insufficient staffing, and financial pressures.
3. School support staff make up more than half of the school workforce, and their numbers continue to increase each year.
4. Support staff pay is firmly in the lower half of the earnings distribution in England, with TA pay even lower, although both have risen significantly in recent years in real terms and relative to average earnings.

Recommendations

1. The Government needs to do more to support schools in recruiting support staff, particularly TAs. As schools frequently report shortages in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) skills as a major recruitment challenge, there should be greater emphasis on ensuring that training is available to both prospective and current TAs to address this gap.
2. The Government and the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) should explore ways to improve career progression opportunities for school support staff, who are currently much less likely than comparable workers to feel they have good opportunities.
3. Government and the SSSNB should carefully consider whether low pay levels are contributing to the recruitment and retention challenges identified. Although there has been some recent progress, they should assess what further medium-term action is needed to make support staff pay, particularly for TA roles, more attractive.

Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis?

Published March 2026

This blog examined what schools' experiences with SEN units and/or resourced provision can teach us about inclusion bases and considers whether they might form part of a meaningful solution to the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) crisis.

Key Findings

1. Around two-thirds of schools that reported having a SEN unit and/or resourced provision say this enhances their overall capacity. However, just under 10 per cent of primary and secondary schools explicitly disagreed with this statement, and around a quarter were on the fence.
2. Over two-thirds of schools with a base say it creates significant pressure on staffing or budgets, and fewer than half feel they have sufficient specialist expertise.
3. In a quarter of schools, pupils in bases have limited interaction with their peers, and over a third report weak collaboration between base staff and mainstream teachers.
4. Many more schools consider themselves to be running an inclusion base, as indicated by the presence of a SEN unit and/or resourced provision, as captured by government data, albeit many of these bases may not receive formal funding or recognition.

Recommendations

Inclusion bases have the potential to increase capacity, embed specialist expertise within mainstream schools, and provide tailored support closer to pupils' communities.

To fully realise this potential, and to ensure that inclusion bases enhance rather than fragment mainstream provision, it will be essential to provide:

- Sustained, adequate funding
- Access to specialist staff
- Strong integration between base and mainstream teams
- Clear expectations for inclusion and pupil experience
- Monitoring to ensure bases extend, rather than limit, opportunities for pupils.

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The Early Years Workforce in England Annual Report 2026

Published February 2026

This was the first in a series of reports, funded by the Nuffield Foundation on the education workforce to monitor the progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

This report summarised the latest research and emerging trends in early years workforce numbers, recruitment, retention, pay and working conditions. It also highlighted the policy actions most likely to deliver meaningful improvements in addressing these pressures.

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Key Findings

1. Despite strong growth between 2023 and 2024, the latest estimates indicate that early years staff numbers may have plateaued between 2024 and 2025, with an estimated increase of only 600 staff.
2. Pay in the early years sector remains low compared with that of similar workers in other fields, with the gap larger for those who are more highly qualified.
3. Early years workers report lower levels of anxiety, higher levels of life satisfaction, and a stronger sense that their work is worthwhile compared with similar workers. These positive differences are increasing over time.
4. The early years sector may not be attractive long-term for highly qualified staff, which in turn can reduce the incentive for lower-qualified staff to pursue further qualifications if progression is unlikely.
5. Regions such as the South West, West Midlands and North East may be facing staffing shortfalls.

Recommendations

1. Government should ensure that funding rates support early years providers to offer competitive wages to recruit and retain staff, supported by a pay structure that rewards higher qualification levels.
2. Government should put its policy proposals for the early years professional development offer and career pathway into action to help upskill the existing workforce.
3. Alongside greater availability of professional development, the Government should carefully consider how regulation could help create clear opportunities for career progression and establish a pay structure that incentivises gaining additional qualifications.
4. Government and providers should highlight the strong sense of worthwhileness, fulfilment and positive working environments found in early years settings as part of their recruitment efforts.

What helps to improve teacher retention? A pathway analysis of factors affecting retention

Published February 2026

This report, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, explored the factors that influence teachers' decisions to leave the profession to help identify the actions policymakers could take to further improve teacher retention rates.

We used newly available survey data from the Department for Education's (DfE) Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTL) survey linked to retention outcomes in the School Workforce Census (SWC). We used regression analysis to explore the relationship between a range of potential explanatory factors and retention, using a pathway approach that unpacks the complex relationship between explanatory factors, job satisfaction and wellbeing, and retention.

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Key Findings

1. An increase in time spent on dealing with pupil behaviour and pastoral support is a key factor affecting teacher retention.
2. Time spent on lesson planning plays a significant role in teachers choosing to leave the profession.
3. Teachers who feel valued, involved in school decision-making and supported with flexible working opportunities are more likely to stay in the profession.
4. The impact of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on teachers' practice is a significant retention factor.
5. Teacher pay satisfaction is also a significant factor associated with retention, suggesting that teacher pay growth since 2010/11 lagging behind pay growth in the wider labour market is likely to have had a detrimental impact on recruitment and retention.

Recommendations

1. Government should further strengthen its approach to supporting schools in improving pupil behaviour and addressing pupils' additional pastoral and learning needs, reinforced by improved external school support services and additional funding.
2. School leaders should consider how teachers can be meaningfully involved and engaged in shaping the school's organisational development priorities and in wider decision-making processes.
3. Government should aim to sustain pay satisfaction by at least maintaining the competitiveness of teachers' pay each year (i.e. matching the growth in average earnings outside teaching) and by providing schools with the funding needed to deliver it.
4. School and trust leaders should consider whether, and in what ways, generative AI tools such as ChatGPT could support reducing teachers' planning workload.

Securing success from start to finish: Investigating factors associated with apprenticeship withdrawal

Published January 2026

Just over half (55 per cent) of apprentices who were scheduled to achieve their apprenticeship in the 2022/23 academic year did so. This increased to 61 per cent in 2023/24 but remains a long way short of the start of the 2010's, when over 70 percent of apprentices typically completed within the scheduled timeframe.

This report, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, examined the factors linked to apprenticeship withdrawal and evaluated policy options aimed at reducing withdrawals.

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Key Findings

1. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to withdraw from apprenticeships, and prior qualification levels are strongly related to their probability of withdrawing from an apprenticeship standard.
2. The switch from apprenticeship frameworks to standards is a key factor in explaining the substantial decline in the apprenticeship achievement rate over the last decade.
3. Training with a more experienced training provider is associated with lower withdrawal rates.
4. Apprentices based at larger employers, experienced employers with the apprenticeship system, and employers who have larger scale apprenticeship programmes, are less likely to withdraw from an apprenticeship standard.
5. Apprentices that are paid more in the first year of their apprenticeship are less likely to withdraw, but effect sizes are small.
6. Learners who completed their apprenticeship earn more afterwards than otherwise similar learners who withdraw.

Recommendations

1. The Government should explore building on existing initiatives by directing additional support toward apprentices, employers, and providers who are linked to a higher likelihood of withdrawal.
2. Government should ensure that sufficient pre-apprenticeship programmes are in place to prepare young people to begin and complete a full apprenticeship, with particular focus on those with low prior attainment.

‘What should happen to teachers’ pay from 2026?’ and ‘What should STRB recommend for teachers’ pay from 2026?’

Published December 2025 and January 2026

NFER published a two-part research blog to provide context for the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB) as it develops recommendations for teachers’ pay.

The first blog, ‘What should happen to teachers’ pay from 2026?’, explored recent trends in teacher pay and evaluated the proposed 6.5 per cent pay award over three years that the Department for Education (DfE) made in its evidence to STRB.

The second blog, ‘What should STRB recommend for teachers’ pay from 2026?’, explored what the implications of different STRB recommendations might be for teacher recruitment and retention trends by using NFER’s redevelopment supply forecast and simulation model, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

Blog 1 Key Findings

1. DfE’s pay proposal of 6.5 per cent over three years is more likely to lead to a further loss of competitiveness and therefore be detrimental to recruitment and retention.
2. A pay award for 2027/28 that is announced in April 2026 could be affected by an unexpected event in late 2026 that rapidly impacts on pay awards in the wider labour market. It would be prudent for STRB to give itself some flexibility to revise pay awards beyond 2026/27 in such circumstances.

Blog 2 Key Findings

1. Secondary teacher supply is likely to improve between 2024/25 and 2026/27 under current policy. However, the model forecasts that the supply of secondary teachers is likely to fall after 2026/27, by 1,300 teachers in 2027/28, and another 2,100 and 2,300 in the years after.
2. To meet the Government’s target of recruiting 6,500 teachers, it may have to rely on a combination of more teachers in special schools, alternative provision (AP) settings and further education (FE), and more non-specialist secondary teachers.
3. A higher three-year teacher pay award could address some of the likely decline in teacher supply, but not all.

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Tracking attainment without a counterfactual - Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic: A meta-method review

Published January 2026

This report, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, reviewed seven major studies that tracked pupil attainment during and after the Covid-19 pandemic in England to provide actionable recommendations for future research both before and during wide-spread prolonged educational disruptions. The seven studies, commissioned in challenging circumstances to compressed timelines, sought to understand the impact of school closures and disruption on learning across all key stages. They vary widely in their methodologies, measures and conclusions.

The report identified common risks of bias, arising from insufficient confounding factors, selection effects, missing data, post-exposure interventions, and limited validation of outcome measures. It also considered risks of misinterpretation, given the complexity of findings and the potential for overgeneralisation.

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Recommendations

1. Foundational for future studies in similar circumstances to avoid risk of bias in results due to selection, participation, and attrition, is the development of comprehensive causal models for learning and participation. These should be developed and agreed upon by the research community.
2. Increased use of questionnaires should be considered to reduce the impact of, and help interpret, any bias from selection and missing data. Noting that missing data was much more prevalent during the disruptive period of the pandemic. By surveying both selected and non-selected schools, and participating and non-participating schools, the questionnaire responses would give valuable confounder measurement.
3. To illustrate the extent of 'model uncertainty' inherent in the study analyses, missing data analysis should include sensitivity analysis under various plausible missing not at random (MNAR) scenarios.
4. To enable the efficient use of existing data in future studies the data gathered by test publishers should enable direct matching to the national pupil database, and student test data use permissions should consider being opt-out and should include usage for such studies.
5. To build coherent and broader understanding to inform policy and research, individual studies should be designed to enable inclusion in any subsequent meta-analysis studies, and this may be enhanced by improved coordination.
6. Score and analysis validity should be strengthened to ensure that reported findings reflect true effects rather than artifacts of data generation or analytical procedures.
7. Reporting transparency should be enhanced to prevent over-generalisation and to ensure that models and assumptions are presented comprehensively and clearly for technical experts.

Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce

Published November 2025

This is the final report from The Skills Imperative 2035 programme, a five-year programme funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

This report is the culmination of eight working papers identifying how the structure and composition of jobs in the labour market could change by 2035, what skills will be most needed to do these jobs, and who is most likely to be affected by these changes.

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Key Findings

1. Around 12 million workers in England currently work in occupations which are in decline. Between one and three million of these jobs could disappear by 2035, largely due to AI and automation – more than previously forecast.
2. The number of jobs in the labour market is expected to grow by 2035, but most of this growth is in professional and technical jobs such as science, engineering and legal roles.
3. There is a critical need to support lower skilled occupations who are at risk of displacement from technology adoption to upskill and reskill, so that they can successfully transition in the labour market.
4. The research has identified six essential employment skills (EES) which will be most in demand by employers in the future: (1) communication, (2) collaboration, (3) problem solving, (4) organising, planning & prioritising work, (5) creative thinking and (6) information literacy.

Recommendations

1. EES should be mapped throughout the curriculum in a way that supports clarity and consistency for educators about how students should be able to develop knowledge within each subject that draws on, and develops, their EES.
2. Government should explore what additional incentives or changes to funding and accountability measures might be introduced to encourage and recognise efforts by post-16 providers and universities to develop their students' EES, and support successful pathways into employment or further study.
3. The Department for Education (DfE) should expand on current statutory careers guidance, encouraging all schools to shape work experience and employer encounters around a common skills framework.
4. Schools should be given guidance, tools and training on how to formatively assess young people's development of EES.
5. Government should help students to understand the importance of developing their EES and to articulate them using a common skills framework.

High-SEND schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools

Published October 2025

This interim report, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, shared early findings on the uneven distribution of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) across mainstream schools in England. These insights are based on analysis of the National Pupil Database and interviews with 10 staff from nine local authorities (LAs).

Key Findings

1. In 2024/25, more than 1.7 million pupils in England were identified as having SEND — equivalent to around one in five pupils in the school system. This compares to 1.2 million pupils with identified SEND in 2015/16.
2. More than half of pupils (56 per cent) with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) - legally binding plans for pupils with the most significant and complex special educational needs - are educated in mainstream schools. This is up from 49 per cent in 2015/16, with the sharpest rise in primary settings.
3. Primary schools with the highest rates of pupils with EHCPs had, on average, six times as many pupils with EHCPs as those with the lowest rates. This equates to an average of 17 pupils per school in the highest quartile compared to three pupils per school in the lowest quartile. In secondary schools, the difference was around fivefold.

Recommendation

1. Early findings indicate that government plans to reform the SEND system should prioritise greater consistency and equity.
2. It is essential that schools with strong inclusive cultures are supported rather than penalised.
3. Accountability measures and resources are aligned to avoid placing disproportionate pressure on schools serving higher numbers of pupils with SEND.

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Pupil numbers and school finances - what do we know about how demographic changes are impacting schools?

Published October 2025

With schools in England continuing to face substantial financial pressures, this blog brought together and updated NFER's evidence on the impact of falling pupil numbers to consider the potential effects of demographic change on school finances.

Key Findings

1. The Department for Education (DfE) forecasts primary pupil numbers will fall by seven per cent between January 2025 and 2030 - equivalent to over 1,000 average-sized primary schools.
2. In response to declining numbers, schools are having to reduce the number of classes by 4.8 per cent nationally and average class size by 2.5 per cent nationally.
3. There has been an overall decline in primary pupil numbers across all regions since 2017/18. While London remains the region with the largest decline, schools in other regions are increasingly being affected.
4. Between January and December 2024, the 10 London Local Authorities (LAs) with the greatest pupil declines from 2017/18 to 2024/25 saw five school closures and five mergers. This compares, over the same period, to 1.3 primary school closures and 0.9 mergers per 10 LAs across the rest of England.

Recommendation

1. As schools contend with these challenges, it is crucial that they are adequately supported by local and national government to minimise the risk of adverse impacts on pupils.

Self-funded by

‘Senior leaders under pressure as pupil numbers fall’ and ‘The state of additional support needs and services in English schools’

Published September 2025

NFER published a two-part research blog exploring the challenges schools faced as they returned for a new term.

The first blog, ‘Senior leaders under pressure as pupil numbers fall’, examined the impact of funding pressures and demographic changes on schools.

The second blog, ‘The state of additional support needs and services in English schools’, explored how pupil needs have changed, how teachers are being supported and how senior leaders are responding.

The blogs drew on responses from over 350 senior leaders and 800 classroom teachers to NFER’s June 2025 Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey.

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Blog 1 Key Findings

1. Seventy-one per cent of primary and 65 per cent of secondary leaders are anticipating an in-year budget deficit in 2025/26.
2. A substantial minority of primary school senior leaders (at 21 per cent) report they had or were on track to have an in-year budget deficit that they expect to fund by a negative revenue balance in 2024/25 (as they have no reserves to cover it).
3. Three in five primary school leaders in 2024/25 reported being somewhat or very concerned about the impact of declining pupil numbers on their settings.
4. Around two in five secondary senior leaders said they were somewhat or very concerned about the looming impact on their schools. This is despite secondary pupil numbers not being forecast to dip for a couple more years.

Blog 2 Key Findings

1. Senior leaders estimate that nearly a quarter of pupils require extra support for general wellbeing, mental health, and to access learning and social and extracurricular activities.
2. At least seven in 10 teachers say they received less than a good level of support for their pupils across key support services.
3. Over half of classroom teachers report little or no help from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)/Mental health services, more than for any other service.
4. Four in five secondary senior leaders report commissioning external counselling services for pupils, and more than three in five did so for teaching staff.
5. While schools appear to be commissioning external services to fill these gaps, this may not be sustainable in the longer term as financial pressures on school budgets and wider public services stretch resources further.

Do free schools increase opportunities and reduce disparities in economic and social outcomes?

Published July 2025

Free schools are all-ability schools established in 2010 by the former Coalition Government to foster innovation and choice in education, although the priorities of the programme have evolved over time.

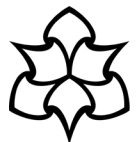
This report, conducted by NFER in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), evaluated the impact of secondary free schools on pupil outcomes, including for those living in the most deprived areas.

Funded by



**UK Research
and Innovation**

In partnership with



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

Key Findings

1. Enrolling in a secondary free school is estimated to have had a significant positive effect on Key Stage 4 (KS4) attainment. A pupil enrolled at a free school was 4.6 percentage points more likely to be awarded five GCSEs graded 9-4/A*-C (including Maths and English) compared to their siblings enrolled at other types of schools. A comparable pattern was found for Progress 8 scores and for pupils living in deprived areas.
2. Enrolling in a free school has an impact on lowering pupil absence. The estimated absence rate of a pupil enrolled at a free school during Key Stage 4 (KS4) was 0.7 percentage points lower than their siblings at other types of schools.
3. There was no evidence that suspensions differ between free schools and non-free schools for all pupils, or those living in the most deprived areas.
4. Pupils enrolled at a free school are more likely to be taking at least one A-level compared to their siblings enrolled at other types of schools. This finding was similar for pupils living in the most deprived areas.

Recommendation

1. Further research is required to understand exactly why secondary free schools have been successful in supporting the outcomes of pupils and identify whether any lessons can be drawn to enable both new and existing schools to better support pupil outcomes, including those in deprived areas.

The impact of early career retention payments on teacher retention

Published June 2025

This evaluation, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, provided a new analysis of the impact on teacher retention of five major Early Career Retention Payments (ECRPs) that have been piloted in England since 2018. The study broadened the evidence base on the effectiveness of retention payments and highlighted the implications for future policy design.

Our analysis covers the impact so far of five schemes that have been piloted since 2018: maths and physics retention payment (MPRP), teacher student loan reimbursement (TSLR), maths phased bursary (MPB), early career payment (ECP) and levelling up premium (LUP).

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Key Findings

1. Overall, eligibility for the five ECRPs that have been piloted in England since 2018 is associated with teacher leaving rates that are 5.1 per cent per year lower than they otherwise might have been. However, while our findings are partially supportive of the conclusions from previous research that retention payments are effective at improving retention, they are not conclusive.
2. Eligibility for the:
 - maths phased bursary (MPB) is associated with a 10.9 per cent per year reduction in leaving rate
 - levelling up premium is associated with a 6.3 per cent per year reduction in leaving rate, although the difference is not statistically significant
 - maths and physics retention payment (MPRP) is associated with an 8.1 per cent per year reduction in the leaving rate, although the difference is not statistically significant.

Recommendations

1. The Government should maintain a policy of teacher retention payments focussed on shortage subjects. Our evidence suggests that while their marginal cost is likely to be high, the impact of eliminating retention payments could be to worsen the teacher supply in these important subjects.
2. The Government should retain a policy of raising bursaries for subjects experiencing teacher supply challenges where bursaries are low and maintain high bursaries for maths, physics, chemistry and computing, raising them over time with the level of the teaching starting salary.
3. The Government should continue to monitor and evaluate the impacts of new retention payment policies, such as the Targeted Retention Incentive.
4. The Government should invest in deepening the evidence base of interventions that can improve teacher recruitment and retention.

Ethnic disparities in entry to teacher training, teacher retention and progression to leadership

Published June 2025

This report, funded by Mission44, follows NFER's previous research on racial equality in the teacher workforce to further explore the factors influencing ethnic disparities at three key progression points: entry into initial teacher training (ITT), progression to leadership and retention.

Commissioned by

MISSION44

Key Findings

1. If applicants to postgraduate teacher training from ethnic minority backgrounds were accepted on to training courses at the same rate as their white counterparts, the system would train around 2,000 more teachers per year.
2. If UK-domiciled applicants from all ethnic backgrounds were the same age, had similar socio-economic backgrounds and types of qualifications, and applied to the same providers, the gap in rejection rates between applicants from Asian and white ethnic backgrounds would be 14 percentage points. Similarly, the gap with white counterparts would be 18, six and 18 percentage points for applicants from black, mixed and other ethnic backgrounds, respectively.
3. Teachers from Asian and black ethnic backgrounds are more likely to intend to apply for promotion than teachers from white ethnic backgrounds.
4. Teachers from a black ethnic background are more likely to consider leaving teaching than their white counterparts.

Recommendations

For Government:

1. Play a more proactive role in encouraging ITT providers, schools and trusts to adopt more inclusive recruitment practices.
2. Pilot innovative approaches to improving equity in teacher recruitment and promotion processes and rigorously evaluate their impact to build the evidence base.

For school and trust leaders:

3. Develop pathways to actively support ethnically diverse teachers who are interested in promotion, such as coaching, shadowing, or promoting leadership training opportunities.
4. Evaluate selection criteria and processes for promotions and appointments to leadership positions to ensure transparency, inclusivity and equity.

For ITT providers:

5. Provide ongoing professional development and reflection to improve equity in their attraction and selection processes.

Learn more about NFER

If you would like to know more about our, our resources, and our services, or about partnering with us in our work, please get in touch:

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In a world of unprecedented change and technological innovation, it is more important than ever that education policy and practice is informed by high-quality evidence.

NFER exists to create this evidence and get it into the hands of those who can use it to make a difference.

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