



NFER

National Foundation for
Educational Research

The Teaching Workforce: Summary of research

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.



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The Teacher Workforce - An Overview

NFER's teaching workforce research programme combines analysis of large datasets, robust evaluation, surveys and in-depth qualitative research to provide fresh evidence and insights that support improvement in teacher recruitment, retention and development. Our research aims to give policymakers and system leaders an accurate picture of the education workforce to guide effective, proportionate and well-targeted action.

In 2024, the new Labour Government pledged to recruit 6,500 new expert teachers in key subjects over the course of the five-year parliament. The Government is developing its plan for delivering this promised improvement in teacher recruitment and retention. Since policy actions take at least a year or two to influence schools' staffing experience, this year is a crucial moment to act if the Government wants to fulfil its pledge by the end of the current parliament.

The latest data on teacher recruitment and retention in England remains in a perilous state and represents a substantial on-going risk to the quality of education.

Recruitment

In England, teacher recruitment remains far below targeted levels. The secondary initial teacher training (ITT) recruitment data reached 62 per cent of what the Department for Education (DfE) estimated it needed to meet the demand from schools. This was slightly higher than the previous year, however the increases were mainly due to bursary changes in some shortage subjects. Twelve out of seventeen subjects recruited below target last year, continuing the post-pandemic trend of severe under recruitment for secondary.

For postgraduate primary, recruitment reached 88 per cent of target, the third consecutive year of under-recruitment for primary and the start of a worsening trend.

Since 2010/11, the number of teachers in special schools has increased substantially. However, this growth has occurred alongside a rising demand for special education and ongoing challenges in teacher supply in the special needs sector.

Despite being over-represented among applicants for ITT, people of colour are considerably under-represented in teaching. A key factor in the lack of ethnic diversity is the low acceptance rates of ethnic minority applicants onto ITT programmes. The persistent ethnic disparities which cannot be fully explained by observable applicant characteristics in the available data, suggests that discrimination based on ethnic background may be a contributing factor, though we cannot entirely exclude the influence of other elements, such as variations in qualifications or work experience.

Training bursaries have helped to slightly improve recruitment in shortage subjects. A £5,000 increase in a subject's training bursary, on average, leads to a 15 per cent increase in trainees.

Further Education (FE) plays a vital role in the post-16 educational landscape in England. However, the sector faces staff shortages in some subject areas. Teacher pay in FE is generally lower than the rest of the sector, meaning that teachers are less likely to make the move to FE. However, offering higher pay to new recruits creates pay inequalities with existing staff.

Retention

In 2022/23, 9.6 per cent of teachers left teaching in the state sector. This was slightly lower than the previous year but marginally higher than the year before the pandemic. Persistent shortages and recruitment challenges mean that meeting the 6,500-teacher supply target will likely need a focus on improving retention alongside increasing recruitment.

Teachers' working hours fell slightly in 2023/24 but remained higher than working hours for similar graduates working in other jobs. In 2023/24, the average full-time teacher worked 46 hours per full working week, about five hours per week more than for similar graduates. Nearly all (90 per cent) of the teachers considering leaving the profession cited high workload. Alongside administrative work, teachers have said pupil behaviour is driving higher workload as they spend more time writing behaviour incident follow-ups.

Similar to primary and secondary schools, FE teachers have reported they have too many, and constantly changing, administrative responsibilities contributing to unmanageable workloads.

Retention is also significantly lower among people of colour. Teachers from a black ethnic background were more likely than their white counterparts to report experiencing bullying and harassment was an important reason for considering leaving the profession.

Teacher pay is another major factor causing teachers to leave the profession. A series of below-inflation pay rises, the 2021 teacher pay freeze, and the cost-of-living crisis have led the competitiveness of teacher pay to fall significantly over the last decade. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecast that average earnings will grow by 6.1 per cent between 2026/27 and 2028/29. Teacher pay growth will therefore need to exceed this in order to improve in competitiveness by the end of the parliament.

FE colleges often mitigated against low pay by recruiting teachers from industry at the top of the FE teacher pay scale, thereby limiting future pay progression. For example, Construction and Engineering teachers with no prior experience in an FE teaching role tended to earn more than inexperienced teachers in other subjects but also tended to hit an 'earnings ceiling' more quickly. The lack of progression opportunities in FE colleges compared to industry created challenges for retention, particularly for more experienced teaching staff.



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

Published June 2025

This report, funded by Mission44, followed NFER's previous research on racial equality in the teacher workforce in May 2022 to further explore the factors influencing ethnic disparities at three key progression points: entry into ITT, progression to leadership and retention.

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.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Government:

1. The DfE should play a more proactive role in encouraging ITT providers, schools and trusts to adopt more inclusive recruitment practices. This will help it deliver its key objective of recruiting 6,500 teachers, thereby increasing education quality, as well as promoting equality and fairness within the workforce.

Recommendations for school and trust leaders:

2. School and trust leaders should evaluate their selection criteria and processes for appointing to promoted and leadership posts to ensure they are transparent, inclusive and equitable, particularly considering disparities by ethnicity.

Recommendations for ITT providers:

3. ITT providers should audit and evaluate their selection criteria and processes for equity, diversity and inclusion, particularly considering disparities in admission by ethnicity, socioeconomic background and age.

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MISSION44

The impact of early career retention payments on teacher retention

Published June 2025

This evaluation, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, explored the impact of early career retention payments (ECRPs) on teacher retention in England. The study broadened the evidence base on the effectiveness of retention payments, particularly in light of the Government's 6,500 new teachers pledge and highlights the implications for future policy design.

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. Removing the payments could lead retention to worsen and sustaining them long-term as an offer for future early career teachers could prompt additional recruitment benefits.
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.

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Teacher Labour Market in England 2025

Published March 2025

NFER's annual Teacher Labour Market report monitors the progress the education system in England is making towards meeting the teacher supply challenge by measuring the key indicators of teacher supply and working conditions.

The seventh annual report showed that teacher supply is in a critical state, representing a substantial risk to the quality of education.

Key Findings

1. Teacher unfilled vacancy levels are at their highest rates since records began in 2010, and June's Spending Review is the Government's last chance to hit its 6,500 new teacher target.
2. Teacher leaving rates have not improved since before the pandemic. More leavers are of working age rather than those retiring.
3. This, coupled with persistently poor recruitment into initial teacher training (ITT), is leading to widespread teacher shortages, with unfilled vacancies reaching six per thousand teachers in 2023/24.
4. Ninety per cent of teachers considering leaving teaching in 2023/24 cited high workload as a factor and pupil behaviour has become one of the fastest-growing contributors to workload since the pandemic.
5. Trainee recruitment for all, except five, secondary subjects was below the respective target in 2024/25 and NFER's latest forecast for 2025/26 shows only five subjects have reasonable chance of recruiting at or above target.

Recommendations

1. The School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) should recommend that the 2025/26 teacher pay award exceeds three per cent and/ or strongly signal that it intends to make future recommendations exceeding forecast rates of average earnings growth.
2. The Government should supplement pay rises with increases in spending on financial incentives targeting shortage subjects.
3. The Government should develop a teacher workload reduction strategy to improve retention that is fully integrated with the wider policy reform agenda.
4. Schools should consider whether and how generative AI tools such as ChatGPT could help improve teachers' planning workload.
5. The Government should develop a new approach for supporting schools to improve pupil behaviour, reinforced by improved external school support services and backed with additional funding in the Spending Review.
6. School leaders should consider adopting a wider range of flexible working practices in their schools to improve teacher retention.

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How to recruit 6,500 teachers? Potential routes to achieving the Government's teacher supply pledge

Published December 2024

The Government has pledged to recruit 6,500 new teachers in key subjects over the course of the five-year parliament.

This report explored the role of financial policy levers - pay, bursaries and early career retention payments (ECRPs) - as well as non-financial measures, such as workload reduction, in meeting the teacher supply target.

Key Findings

1. Many of the current policy measures would not be sufficient to meet the supply target in isolation.
2. The Government would need to increase teacher pay by nearly 10 per cent a year, for two years, to reach the 6,500-teacher target, if using pay as a sole incentive. This would cost the government £4.9 billion per year from 2026/27 to finance.
3. The Government should publish a comprehensive strategy for how it defines and plans to meet the 6,500-teacher supply target, with sufficient funding to deliver it, and should invest in deepening the evidence base of interventions that can improve recruitment and retention.

Recommendations

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2. The Government should invest in deepening the evidence base of interventions that can improve recruitment and retention.

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What recent trends in graduate numbers could mean for the future of teacher supply

Published November 2024

This analysis looked at trends in the number of graduates by degree subject, and the likely impact of these on the teaching workforce.

We combined data on UK graduate numbers by subject from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and undergraduate applications by subject from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to measure these trends.

Key Findings

1. Some subjects (languages, English, theology and religious studies and geography) are more likely to produce teachers than others.
2. Maths teachers come from a wider variety of degree backgrounds than in other subjects.
3. The recent trends in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) graduate numbers have generally been positive for shortages subjects in teaching.

Recommendations

1. A focus for policy attention should be subjects that are large and growing, with a low relative likelihood of entering teaching.
2. Government and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) providers should look at ITT admissions guidance and processes to ensure that teachers from a wide range of career backgrounds can enter teaching in shortage subjects if they meet the other selection criteria and can demonstrate good subject knowledge.
3. Government and ITT providers should consider how courses are marketed, ensuring students on a wide range of degree courses with relevant subject knowledge for shortage ITT subjects are made aware of the attractiveness of a route into teaching.

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Building a stronger FE college workforce: How improving pay and working conditions can help support FE college teacher supply

Published September 2024

Further education (FE) is key to delivering technical and academic qualifications to post-16 students and adult learners in England but has recently been facing significant challenges, including critical staff shortages in some subject areas.

This mixed-method research investigated some of the key barriers FE colleges face in recruiting and retaining staff in three subject areas: Construction, Engineering and Digital.

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Key Findings

1. The combination of skills shortages within Construction, Engineering and Digital and the pay differential with both industry and other education roles places FE at a disadvantage for both recruitment and retention.
2. The financial responsibilities of younger workers mean they are generally less able to take the pay cut to move from industry into FE, driving an ageing workforce.
3. FE salary bands are narrow, limiting opportunities for pay progression – particularly where unqualified teachers are recruited straight from industry at the top of the band to reduce the pay gap.
4. Offering higher pay to support recruitment feeds poor retention by creating pay inequalities that lower staff morale.
5. FE teachers consider their workload to be excessive and inappropriately centred on unfulfilling administrative work.

Recommendations

1. Government should continue to increase investment in the FE sector to help colleges, at a minimum, match FE teacher pay with that of school teachers.
2. Colleges should consider how they can help recruit and retain more teaching staff from industry, by improving onboarding procedures for new staff and by better promoting the positive lifestyle benefits of the role to potential recruits.
3. Government should devise a long-term evidence-based strategy and concrete resources to help reduce FE teacher workload, similar to what exists for schools. This strategy should be informed by further research on how improving working conditions can help support FE teacher supply, including by collecting qualitative and quantitative data on teacher workload.
4. Government should continue to support improvements to future waves of data relating to post-16 providers.

Next Government needs long-term pay strategy that will help teacher supply challenge

Published May 2024

This analysis explored ways in which the Government should tackle the teacher shortages challenge.

NFER developed a baseline scenario that forecasts future teacher recruitment and retention and simulates the responses to different future policy scenarios, relating to changes to pay and other financial incentives such as bursaries and early-career retention payments.

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Key Findings

1. Teacher supply has fallen since 2021/22 and continues to fall in our baseline scenario, where teacher pay growth matches forecasted growth in average earnings.
2. Higher pay growth is associated with greater teacher supply across all phases/subjects. Higher pay makes teaching more attractive to enter and improves retention of existing teachers, thereby reducing subjects' respective targets.
3. Increasing teacher pay more slowly than average earnings is only likely to compound current supply challenges.
4. Improving the retention rate of teachers by one per cent would have a considerable positive impact on teacher supply by 2027/28.

Recommendations

1. Government needs to adopt a long-term strategy towards teacher pay that is supported with adequate funding.

Response

In July 2024, the Labour Government's Secretary of State for Education confirmed a teacher pay award of 5.5 per cent.

NFER's School Workforce Lead, Jack Worth, said "We welcome the funded teacher pay award of 5.5% as a necessary first step in addressing the chronic issues with recruitment and retention that are affecting schools and risk damaging the quality of pupils' education. Crucially, the Secretary of State has confirmed this will be a fully funded pay award."

"We support and echo the STRB's conclusions that the deterioration in teachers' pay competitiveness compared to other professions needs addressing, that this pay award represents good value for money for taxpayers and that the DfE should begin work on a strategic and transparent workforce plan for the teaching profession immediately."



NFER Teacher Workforce Blogs

Addressing teacher workload & pay should be a focus for political parties

Published March 2024

Published in Schools Week, Jack Worth wrote an opinion piece which explored what can be done to improve teacher recruitment and retention.

While 2023's pay award stalled the decline in real-terms teacher pay, it remains uncompetitive compared to strong post-pandemic earnings growth in other sectors.

Teachers' working hours significantly increased in 2022/23 compared to the previous year. Teachers had identified worsening pupil behaviour as a major contributor to their workload. They highlighted increased support from external agencies for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health, and safeguarding as crucial to further reducing workload. We recommended that the Government should set up an independent review focusing on how to reduce teachers' workload related to behaviour management and pastoral care.

SCHOOLS
WEEK

An image problem

Published June 2024

In this piece, published in ASCL's Leader Magazine, Dawson McLean explored the state of the teacher supply in England and found that it has significantly worsened since the pandemic.

In 2023/24, secondary ITT recruitment achieved only half its target despite enhanced bursaries and international recruitment efforts. Meanwhile, teacher leaving rates had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Dawson suggested that high workloads and worsening pupil behaviour, exacerbated by the pandemic, have further fuelled teacher dissatisfaction. Additionally, the rise of remote and hybrid working has made other professions more appealing to graduates seeking flexibility, leaving teaching at a disadvantage as it cannot offer similar arrangements.

The article said school leaders must expand efforts to improve workload and flexible working policies.

Leader
The magazine for school and college leaders

Could Gen Z solve the teacher supply shortage?

Published July 2024

First published in Tes, Dawson McLean investigated whether Gen Z (people born between 1997 and 2012) would be a new hope for teacher numbers.

The blog said that beyond competitive pay and better working conditions, the values and career aspirations of younger generations play a significant role in recruiting new teachers. Dawson found that Gen Z demonstrates a stronger inclination towards pro-social careers, like teaching, driven by a desire to contribute to society and help others. Career aspirations towards teaching also start early and are strongly predictive of whether someone becomes a teacher later on. Among those who became a teacher by age 25, more than 60 per cent had said they wanted to be a teacher when they were younger.

Dawson said policymakers need to ensure that this social motivation is nurtured by offering a competitive and supportive teaching environment in order to attract and retain young talent in the profession.

tes

Would introducing student loan reimbursements be an effective way to encourage more teachers to stay?

Published September 2024

In this blog, first published in Tes, Sarah Tang explored one of the Government's policy options, Teacher Student Loan Reimbursement (TSLR), which could reduce teacher attrition, especially in shortage subjects. The pilot scheme showed some evidence of lowering leaving rates, but further research is needed. A nationwide TSLR scheme could provide an additional 2,100 teachers after one year, with a similar cost to current training bursaries.

Comparing TSLRs with other policies like bursaries and Early-Career Retention Payments (ECRPs), TSLRs offer flexibility challenges but could be effective for subjects where bursaries are high. While bursaries remain impactful, their effectiveness diminishes when applied to subjects with existing high incentives. TSLRs, especially targeted at shortage areas, could complement a broader strategy to boost teacher supply, though careful consideration is required for equitable implementation.

FE colleges need better tools to compete for their teacher workforce

Published September 2024

In this blog, first published in FE News, Dawson McLean explored the issues in FE teacher supply and how to address them.

Dawson found that a severe shortage of FE teachers is driven by declining pay and poor working conditions, making it difficult to attract teachers with relevant industry experience, especially in subjects like Construction, Engineering, and Digital. Government funding cuts over the past decade have reduced real-terms pay, widening the gap between FE salaries and industry wages, which impacts both recruitment and retention.

To address these issues, the blog said the Government must focus on closing the pay gap between FE colleges and other educational settings. A potential first step could be for the STRB to produce a dedicated report on FE teacher pay. Additionally, providing flexible working models and support for teachers can help retain skilled staff. By improving both financial and non-financial support, policymakers can enhance the attractiveness of teaching in FE colleges and boost teacher supply.





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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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