Introduction and background

Over the last 6 years, the school age population has been growing. The number of pupils of primary and nursery age in state-funded schools increased by 598,000 (14.6%) in the 6 years to January 2017. This larger cohort is now beginning to move into secondary education. Following a decrease between 2011 and 2015, the number of secondary age pupils in state-funded schools has begun to increase and is forecast to rise by 540,000 (19.4%) between 2017 and 2025. The Department for Education (DfE) is accountable to the Public Accounts Committee for the way in which it spends the budget allocated to it. This in-depth report by the Committee looks at how effective the DfE has been in tackling the looming teacher supply crisis. Much of the report’s content is based on oral and written evidence which was taken from a wide range of key stakeholders, including headteachers.

Key findings

Teacher recruitment and retention

- Between November 2010 and November 2016 there was a small rise in the teaching workforce. However, within this figure, there was a 4.9 per cent decrease in the number of teachers in secondary schools.
- According to the National Audit Office Report published in September 2017, the pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools has remained fairly constant since 2011, at around 20.6 pupils per teacher. However, in secondary schools the ratio has increased from 14.9 to 15.6 in spite of a fall in pupil numbers. With the predicted rise in secondary pupil numbers, this ratio is also set to rise.
- In 2011, 6 per cent of the qualified teacher workforce left the profession for reasons other than retirement; by 2016 this figure had risen to 8.1 per cent. A large amount of the evidence received from stakeholders cited workload as a key reason for teachers leaving the profession. The NASUWT told the Committee that two-thirds of teachers who had taken part in their recent survey had seriously considered leaving the profession in the previous 12 months.
- Teachers are most likely to leave the profession either in the first 3 years after qualification or as they approach retirement. Research by the Wellcome Trust found that science teachers were more likely to leave than non-science teachers.
- Each year, around £555 million has been spent on training new teachers, compared to £36 million on training and retaining the existing workforce. The DfE has acknowledged that this balance is wrong and has stated that it is carrying out a detailed evaluation of bursaries for new teachers; the results will be reported in summer 2018.
- The DfE has also acknowledged that it has limited evidence about the impact which its retention and recruitment initiatives have had. Headteachers who gave evidence to the Committee reported that they had engaged with Teaching Schools and that they were aware of the establishment of the Chartered College of Teaching. They were not, however, aware of many of the other initiatives listed in a report published by the National Audit Office in September 2017.

Teacher workload

- Evidence submitted to the Committee put workload high on the list of reasons why teachers are leaving. For example, in a recent survey by the National Education Union, workload was cited by 93 per cent of primary teachers and 90 per cent of secondary teachers as the main reason why teachers consider leaving the profession.
- Headteachers who gave evidence reported that teacher contact time is too high because of the need to make financial savings. They also mentioned rising class sizes.
- The DfE reported that only half of schools had used the tools provided in its 2015 workload guidance. Of these, just under a third had reduced teacher workload by up to 2 hours per teacher per week.
- In a DfE survey published in February 2017, classroom teachers and middle leaders reported working an average of 50.4 hours during the reference week. An action plan for reducing unnecessary workload was published alongside the report, but the DfE has no specific target in mind for workload reduction.

Recruitment concerns

- During 2015-16, school leaders only filled around half of their vacant posts with qualified teachers with the necessary expertise and experience. There were particular difficulties with recruitment to maths, science and modern languages. The DfE gave evidence that it is introducing initiatives such as early career payments and exemption from tuition fee repayments. It is also piloting schemes to retrain teachers into shortage subjects.
- With Brexit on the horizon, the DfE gave evidence that it is liaising with decision makers to make them aware of the importance of maintaining the teacher supply from the EU.
- The extent of teacher vacancies varies across England. In 2015 the North East had the lowest proportion of secondary schools reporting at least one vacancy (16.4%), compared to outer London (30.4%), the South east...
The DfE has failed to get a grip on teacher retention and does not have a coherent plan to tackle recruitment and development. It should by April 2018, set out and communicate a coherent plan for how it will support schools to retain and develop the teaching workforce. The plan should include what the it is aiming to achieve and by when, the interventions it will use to achieve its aims, and how it will measure success.

The DfE has not set out what impact it expects to see from its interventions regarding workload. The Department should work with others in the school sector to set out what is an acceptable level of teacher workload, monitor through its periodic surveys of teachers the impact of its actions to reduce unnecessary workload, and identify possible further interventions.

Schools are struggling to recruit teachers of the right quality, particularly in some subjects and areas of the country. The DfE should: set out detailed plans for the national vacancy service; report back by June 2018 on the results of the pilot; write to the Committee by June 2018 to inform it of the actions it has taken to control agency fees and the results achieved; and work with the schools sector to share good practice in implementing flexible working to help attract former teachers to return to the profession.

The National Audit Office’s survey of school leaders found that, after workload, cost of living factors such as house prices are the second most significant barrier to teacher retention, with 42 per cent of respondents reporting it as a barrier. The DfE should set out how it will take account of the housing requirements for teachers, particularly in high-cost areas, in order to support recruitment and retention.

The DfE could not explain why the quality of teaching varies so much across the country, and what action it would take to improve quality in the Midlands and the North of England in particular. It should therefore conduct more work to understand why there are regional differences in teaching quality (for example by engaging more with school leaders in those regions where quality could be most improved) and, in the light of its findings, set out how it proposes to improve the quality of teaching in the Midlands and the North of England.

Teachers are not getting enough good quality continuing professional development throughout their careers. The Department should write to the Committee by April 2018 setting out its plans for improving the quality of CPD available to teachers, its expectations for how much CPD teachers should undertake and how improvements will be paid for.

The DfE has not made clear what it means by its aim of improving social mobility through its 12 opportunity areas and how it will measure progress. It should therefore write to the Committee by April 2018 to explain in more detail its aims for the opportunity areas over both the short term and long term.