Introduction and background

England’s school system faces a growing challenge of ensuring there are sufficient numbers of high-quality teachers employed in schools. This first annual report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on the state of the teacher workforce measures the key indicators of the teacher labour market and teachers’ working conditions. It presents data from a range of sources, which highlight the trends that describe the current teacher supply situation and how it has changed over time. Since teachers’ working conditions have close links to teacher recruitment and retention, the report also includes data on teachers’ working conditions and how they compare to similar individuals in other professional occupations. In defining ‘similar professionals’, NFER have taken a group of professionals with similar characteristics to teachers. The group includes scientists, researchers, engineers, IT professionals, health and nursing professionals, lawyers, accountants, statisticians, economists, social workers, librarians, and journalists.

Key points

The secondary school labour market

- The number of secondary teachers has fallen since 2010. This was aligned to falling pupil numbers up until 2015, but pupil numbers have increased since then. The DfE forecasts that secondary schools will need 15,000 more teachers between 2018 and 2025 to cope with a 15 per cent rise in pupil numbers.
- Retaining more current teachers would help supply by reducing the number of new teachers needed to replace them, thereby meeting growing demand. Retaining teachers also capitalises on the expertise that they have gained through experience. However, the rate of secondary teachers leaving the state sector has increased in recent years, particularly for working-age teachers.
- Initial Teacher Training (ITT) targets have been missed for six years in a row. Growing numbers of pupils means the trainee target is forecast to continue rising until 2023. The risk of teacher supply getting further behind is high. The system needs more recruitment into training to meet the rising need for teachers.
- Under-recruitment and growing leaving rates mean schools have found it more difficult to recruit the teachers they need. Shortages are difficult to measure using the available data, but one proxy measure is vacancies and temporarily-filled teaching posts as a proportion of the number of teachers. The secondary vacancy rate has doubled since 2010, suggesting that teacher shortages are beginning to have an impact.

The primary school labour market

- Between 2010 and 2017, the number of primary teachers rose in line with rising pupil numbers. Pupil numbers are forecast to plateau, so the forecast number of teachers required between 2018 and 2025 is flat. The number of teachers fell in 2017-18 despite slight pupil growth; this could be due to funding constraints or slight teacher undersupply.
- The rate of primary teachers leaving the state sector has increased in recent years, particularly for working-age teachers. Reversing this trend would make it easier for primary recruitment targets to continue being met and retain the expertise of experienced teachers in the classroom, rather than relying more heavily on newly qualified teachers.
- Primary teacher training targets have generally been met over the last decade and additional entry from undergraduate teacher training, which mostly trains primary teachers, has also helped primary to meet targets. Flat pupil number growth means future entry targets are also flat and that primary is not expected to have recruitment problems.
- Despite a relatively strong recruitment and retention picture in primary schools overall, the rate of vacancies and temporarily-filled posts has increased since 2010. This may indicate that some shortages are emerging: the seemingly adequate quantity of primary teachers may not be reflected in the quality of teachers in the market.

Alternative sources of supply and early career teacher retention

- Teachers returning to the state sector (primary and secondary) represent a potential source to fill supply gaps due to under-recruitment to teacher training. However, since 2011, there has been only a slight increase in the number of returners despite policy interventions offering support.
- The number of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) awards to teachers trained overseas increased rapidly from 2011 to 2016. It has since fallen, particularly from countries in the European Economic Area. This may reflect the UK being a
less attractive destination following the EU referendum. Awards from non-EEA countries have been stable, although not all awards result in a teacher entering teaching in England.

- The retention rates of early-career teachers (ECTs) have significantly decreased between 2012 and 2018. Around 87 per cent of teachers who enter teaching remain in the state sector at the end of their first year. This remained stable between 2012 and 2017 but dropped to 85 per cent in 2018. Retention rates of teachers between 2 and 5 years into their careers dropped significantly between 2012 and 2018. These are critical years in which development opportunities, nurture and support can make or break a teaching career. The Government’s Early Career Framework is a package aimed at improving ECT retention, including time off timetable to pursue professional development and support from a trained mentor. This is a promising development, but the quality of implementation will be crucial if it is to be successful.

Recruitment and retention trends by secondary EBacc subjects

- Recruitment to secondary teacher training varies according to EBacc subjects. Recruitment to teacher training in Physics in 2018-19 is more than 50 per cent below the numbers required to maintain supply, and Maths and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) have also regularly fallen short of target. Although bursaries of up to £30,000 are offered for training in these subjects, they do not seem to be attracting sufficient trainees to meet demand.

- The rate of secondary teachers leaving teaching in the state sector has risen since 2012, particularly for working-age teachers. This has been offset by a falling retirement rate. However, the rates of state-sector teachers leaving differs across EBacc subjects from 8.3 per cent for History teachers in 2017-18 to 11.4 per cent of Physics teachers. High leaving rates exacerbate supply gaps in long-standing shortage subjects such as Maths, MFL and Sciences. The Government has committed to altering bursaries for shortage subjects so that some of the bursary is contingent on staying in the state sector, rather than just being paid for training.

Teachers’ working conditions

- The share of teachers with low job satisfaction, an indicator of increased risk of leaving, is broadly similar to other professionals and it has not increased significantly since 2010.

- Working hours for teachers are higher than other professionals during term time, although the school holidays mean when averaged over the whole year, working hours are similar to other professionals. However, the fact that teachers work intensively over fewer weeks in the year can have negative consequences for health and well-being. Teachers’ work-life balance can also be compromised by long working hours during term time. More teachers report low satisfaction with their amount of leisure time than similar professionals.

- Job-related stress is higher among teachers than other professionals, particularly the proportion of teachers feeling ‘tense’ or ‘worried’ about their job most or all of the time.

- Teachers’ pay has, on average, fallen by 12 per cent since 2010, due to public sector pay restraint, compared to a fall of only 5 per cent among similar professionals.

- Teachers’ satisfaction with their income is similar to other professions. Teachers’ decisions to stay in teaching are relatively unresponsive to levels of pay. However, pay can have an important influence on those considering entering teaching and on early-career teachers, particularly in subjects with well-paid alternatives outside teaching, such as science and maths teachers.

- Part-time and flexible working is important for retaining teachers, particularly at certain times of their careers. Since 2011 the number of full-time teachers who would prefer to work part-time has grown, whereas the trend has been stable among other professionals.

- High job security has always been an important feature of the ‘recession-proof’ teaching career offer. However, the strength of the wider labour market has improved since 2010, eroding this relative advantage. The job security of alternative careers can have a big influence on those who are deciding whether or not to enter teaching.