

Is a workforce crisis looming in primary schools?

8

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Recent policy changes are having an effect on the way teachers are recruited. As a result the numbers of students applying for teacher training has fallen by 17 per cent compared to last year, whilst primary school pupil numbers are forecast to rise by 8 per cent by 2015. The result is a potential workforce crisis in primary schools...

There is no doubt that teacher quality is the most crucial factor in successful school systems, and whilst recent government policy interventions have been designed to improve the quality of teaching, new evidence suggests that the dramatic changes made by the government has resulted in a measureable backlash in the number of applications.

A recent report by Professor John Howson, commissioned by the Pearson Think Tank, shows that a combination of factors is fuelling the decline in training numbers.

For a start, changes to the way bursaries are awarded has meant many students are finding it difficult to get funding, particularly where bursaries are being cut back for those applying to teach non-priority subjects. Bursaries are now dependent upon degree classification – in competitive subject areas those holding a 2.2 will not get a bursary.

The drop in applications is most significant in key subjects such Science, Maths and English (by contrast, applications to Physics courses, which attract bursaries of up to £20,000 are up by 19 per cent).

Identifying the culprits

Yet further research shows more students want to join the profession. Over 80 per cent of final-year students think teaching is a high-status career choice, according to recent research by the Teaching Agency, while a separate survey by the agency shows schools and universities are the second most popular type of employer.

Higher course fees appear to be the main culprit behind a drop in the number of students entering Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in 2012, including in the primary sector – which, simultaneously, is seeing a surge in pupil numbers. Particular subjects facing potential shortfalls include English, the Sciences and Mathematics.

Another factor reported by heads – who are finding it harder to recruit teachers than last year – is declining morale in the teaching profession in the face of pressure from government policies and Ofsted.

According to the report, rapid policy changes have impacted both the content of teaching, and conditions under which teachers work. Head teachers are concerned for the morale of the profession, with more than half reporting morale as ‘poor’, or worse, and less than 10 per cent saying it is ‘good’, or better. In fact, Government policies and Ofsted topped the list of key workforce-related issues mentioned by schools relating to problems with morale.

Director of the Pearson Think Tank, Professor Becky Francis, commented on the morale question, saying: “The government and Ofsted need to heed what head teachers are saying about staff morale – a set of policy measures that impact conditions of service, combined with a discourse which is seen to question teachers’ judgement and professionalism, is taking its toll.”

A crisis under wraps

Up to now, not much has been made of the fall in teacher training applications in the media, but this could change due to an emerging crisis in primary places in certain parts of the country.

Currently, pupil numbers are coming to the end of a period of decline in the secondary sector, but are rising strongly in the primary sector – and the numbers are predicted to reach levels not seen since the early 1970s by the end of the current decade.

There are other, more specific and often localised challenges too. Head teacher posts, particularly in smaller primary schools under the control of faith groups, are the most difficult to recruit – particularly if the schools are located in or around London. But difficulties in recruiting head teachers are not confined to primary schools with poor outcomes.

Recent cuts to training targets may be likely to cause teacher shortages in subjects such as History, Geography, Art and Business Studies unless vacancies can be filled from other sources, including those returning to teaching after a career break.

There are also likely to be possible shortages developing in Mathematics and the Sciences, where the number of posts advertised for classroom teachers during 2012 has exceeded the likely supply of NQTs.

But it is the situation in the primary sector that is a particular cause for concern, given rising primary pupil rolls and the apparent drop in ITE applicants.

Any shortages are likely to be greatest in areas where the demand for graduates is highest, namely London and the regions surrounding the capital.

Meanwhile, the workforce morale issues highlighted by head teachers could impact both retention and recruitment.

What can be done?

The report makes a number of common-sense recommendations, which can be condensed down to the following points:



Currently, pupil numbers are coming to the end of a period of decline in the secondary sector, but are rising strongly in the primary sector – and the numbers are predicted to reach levels not seen since the early 1970s by the end of the current decade.



- The government needs to look closely at the warning signs around supply for particular secondary subject areas and, especially, supply to primary teaching. It needs to consider more bursaries for primary ITE, especially in demographic hotspots.
- Both government and Ofsted need to find ways to support and challenge the profession without damaging morale, as they have done with their recent raft of policy changes.
- Training should be more closely linked with employment opportunities in order to ensure a better match between supply and demand in the teacher labour market, as has been proposed for the School Direct programme.
- In view of the importance of school leadership to a successful school system, the government should work with partners, and specifically dioceses, to ensure a school faces no more difficulty in recruiting a new head teacher than it does when advertising any other teaching vacancy. This specifically applies to small

rural primary schools where there are often problems recruiting a new head teacher. In particular, the Government should work together with faith groups to solve the problems of leadership in small, faith-based primary schools.

- The government should closely monitor the effects of the pay freeze on teacher recruitment, particularly in those parts of the country where the market for graduates is most developed.
- It should be ready to take measures to ensure that, as the wider economy revives and demand for graduates increases, teaching does not return to a situation where there are not enough appropriately qualified teachers for all schools.
- Schools should only be allowed to employ teachers without the correct QTS for limited periods of time, during which they should be encouraged to obtain re-certification.
- The government should take into account the true cost of different routes into teaching when assessing how to allocate places between different training routes.
- The government should make clear the basis for the calculation of training targets, and their relationship to likely job opportunities. This is vital in order to allow trainees incurring debt to train as a teacher to be able to assess the risk involved in taking on additional debt to that already incurred as an undergraduate.
- The government should make clear the extent to which the training targets are comprehensive in relation to secondary subjects, and how much supply is expected to be sourced through other routes, such as re-certification.
- The government should ensure that across all teacher preparation routes only candidates with the highest qualifications and personal attributes to become a successful teacher should be allowed to train.

Professor Howson warns that a 'perfect storm' of falling teacher training applications, low staff morale and rapidly rising pupil numbers could be set to create a future teacher workforce crisis in primary schools.

Because of this, the government needs to act now on the recommendations made in the report to ensure that the predicted shortages in the workforce don't undermine the quality of provision - and to avoid a crisis in our schools which would impact on the education of thousands of pupils across the country.