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## Recruitment and retention: 12 solutions

Schools are facing significant and well-documented challenges to the recruitment and retention of teachers. In this Best Practice Focus, **Matt Bromley** draws upon the range of research to offer schools 12 practical solutions...

# Retention and recruitment: 12 solutions for schools

In October and November 2019, I wrote two Best Practice Focus articles for *SecEd* on the thorny issue of teacher workload (Bromley, 2019a, 2019b).

In those articles, I explained that the teaching profession resembled a leaky sieve and that the prevalence of unfulfilled teaching posts – 23 per cent of secondary schools reported an unfilled vacancy in 2017, up 15.9 per cent on 2010 (NAO, 2017) – as well as a growth in the numbers of unqualified teachers – in November 2016 there were 500 fewer qualified teachers in service than in the previous year and 1,400 more unqualified teachers (DfE, 2017) – was proving to be both costly and damaging.

One in 10 teachers, I said, left the profession in 2016. Of these, an increasing proportion left for other sectors rather than retiring, suggesting working conditions are driving them out (DfE, 2017).

Although there are myriad reasons why teachers quit, topping the table in most surveys is workload. According to the National

Audit Office (NAO) research, 67 per cent of school leaders report that workload is a barrier to teacher retention.

Meanwhile, the report *Factors affecting teacher retention* (DfE, 2018a) found that workload remained the most important factor influencing teachers' decisions to quit and most solutions to addressing retention were linked in some way to workload.

So the theory is simple: reduce workload and solve the teacher retention crisis.

But, in truth, it is not as simple as that. Indeed, a report of the House of Commons Education Select Committee (2017) – *Recruitment and retention of teachers* – concluded that workload concerns were not the only reason teachers appear to be leaving the profession. Rather, “overall job satisfaction comes out as the biggest driver, and also things related to whether they feel supported and valued by management”.

This sentiment is echoed in the *Engaging teachers* study from the

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which says that “it is too simplistic to focus solely on workload as the reason ... teachers decide to leave” (Lynch et al, 2016).

As such, in this Best Practice Focus, I will explore some of the other solutions to the problems of recruitment and retention. I will examine the scale of the problem and then analyse its nature. I will explore some potential solutions, including improving pay and conditions, leadership practices, teacher training and CPD opportunities, and career progression and professional recognition. In so doing, I will offer 12 solutions that are within the purview of school leaders.

## The scale of the problem

Why do we have a teacher recruitment and retention crisis? First, pupil numbers are growing. This is due to a demographic bulge which is travelling through the education system, causing a large increase at secondary level.

The secondary school population

in 2018 was 2.85 million, an increase of 1.9 per cent on 2017. The rate of increase for 2019 and 2020 is expected to be 3.1 per cent. The overall population in secondary schools is projected to reach 3.27 million in 2027, 418,000 higher than in 2018 (DfE, 2019a). If we are to ensure these children are properly educated, we will need thousands more teachers in the classroom.

Second, not enough new secondary school trainee teachers are coming into the profession. Initial teacher training (ITT) recruitment figures have missed target for some time now. Most recently, the figures (DfE, 2019b) showed:

- In 2017/18, 14,645 secondary trainees recruited against a target of 18,726.
  - In 2018/19, 16,280 recruited against a target of 19,674
  - In 2019/20, 17,089 recruited against a target of 20,087.
- In 2019/20, the only subjects where the recruitment target was met were biology, geography, history, English and PE. All other

secondary subjects were under-recruited, and some by a significant margin. For instance, maths only recruited 64 per cent of the required number of trainees, physics 43 per cent, and modern foreign languages 62 per cent (DfE, 2019b).

Third, not only are we failing to recruit enough new teachers, we are also losing too many experienced ones. And in record numbers. One in 10 teachers left the profession in 2016 (DfE, 2017) and the number of unfilled teaching post vacancies is now at a record high in secondary schools.

The leaving rate is highest among teachers who teach non-EBacc subjects, which might suggest that they have been incentivised to leave the profession because their subjects are no longer being taught, or that they have become more frustrated or disaffected at their subject taking lower priority.

This may now change in response to the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) with which Ofsted intends to tackle the narrowing of the curriculum, ensuring all pupils have access to a broad and balanced education. But any changes will take time to land.

The crisis in teacher recruitment and retention means that while schools are struggling to fill vacancies and retain experienced staff, large numbers of pupils are being taught by unqualified teachers – or at least teachers who do not have a relevant qualification in the subject they are being asked to teach. The National Education Union highlights, for example that in 2017 only 62 per cent of physics teachers and 75 per cent of chemistry teachers held a relevant post-A level qualification in the subject. For maths and English, these figures were 78 and 81 per cent respectively (NEU, 2019).

As such, high levels of attrition among qualified teachers is not only costly in financial terms, it also has

an impact on the quality of education that schools can provide.

## The nature of the problem

As I have explained, the report *Factors affecting teacher retention* (DfE, 2018a) states that workload is the most important factor influencing teachers' decisions to leave the profession and most suggested solutions to addressing retention were linked in some way to workload.

Although workload is key, teachers' decisions to leave the profession are generally driven by an accumulation of a range of different factors and over a sustained period of time. Few teachers quit based on a single issue.

Having said this, the report did find that, for some teachers, there had been a specific “trigger point”, for example around teaching performance resulting in involvement from the senior leadership team, feeling undervalued after an issue had been highlighted, or a specific behavioural incident involving pupils and parents/carers.

When asked by researchers, teachers found it challenging to provide solutions to retention issues or suggestions for how issues they had faced could have been resolved. Nevertheless, they did provide some ideas for consideration. These related to...

## In-school support

Greater levels of support and understanding from the senior leadership team is needed, for example in terms of the management of pupil behaviour, and the ability to have open and honest conversations.

This would help support teachers' relationships with their senior leaders and reduce feelings of pressure in terms of scrutiny, accountability and workload.



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Considerations would be how the message to senior leaders and teachers can be strengthened to dispel the myths around inspection and the commitment to reduce workload. This would mean giving greater confidence and support to senior leaders to address workload and wellbeing.

## Progression

Greater focus on progression opportunities is important. There is some evidence that the availability of wider progression opportunities may help support retention. This could include alternative subject progression pathways, exploring transferability to other schools, and supporting schools to consider job role swaps.

## Workload at a school level

For most teachers a significant reduction in their workload would have led them to reconsider their decision to leave. As well as supporting schools to implement the recommendations of the Workload Review Groups (DfE, 2016; DfE 2018b), sharing and making accessible good practice examples of success in schools would be beneficial. Supporting teachers with confidence to plan and mark efficiently and effectively and supporting senior leaders to implement the necessary changes, is also vital.

## Improved working conditions

Flexible working and part-time contracts are generally viewed positively. Some viewed these as a way to secure a better work/life balance. Increasing opportunities for flexible working may have a role in helping to retain teachers in the profession, but offering such opportunities without addressing fundamental issues around teacher workload is unlikely to have a significant impact.

Teachers' perceived autonomy over their professional development goals has a strong association with retention and overall improved job satisfaction

Although pay was not the driver for many teachers, it was stated by most that the pay levels were not reflective of teachers' expertise, experience and dedication. Some suggestions included grants/funding for teacher training and better pay and incentives for staying in teaching.

## Professional recognition; greater autonomy

Ensuring teachers felt more respected and valued would have gone some way to retaining them in the sector, according to *Factors affecting teacher retention* (DfE, 2018a), although teachers were unclear on how this could be achieved for the profession as a whole. Their suggestions related to how senior leaders trusted their work and gave them freedom and autonomy to mark and plan.

The NFER and the Teacher Development Trust (TDT) have also published research showing that teachers' perceived autonomy over their professional development goals has a strong association with retention and overall improved job satisfaction (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020; see also *SecEd*, 2020).

Back in the DfE's report (2018a), teachers felt strongly that further subject specialist support for early career teachers was needed, particularly around mentoring, providing networks and resources and using a database to track teachers and offer additional support if they decide to leave.

Concerns included not duplicating what was already available, having the time to use elements of the support package, confidentiality and independence of mentors, and the availability of mentors at a suitable time prior to making a decision to leave.

Teachers wanted their schools to commit to implement the recommendations from the three Workload Review Group reports (DfE, 2016), with evidence suggesting this assurance would be more likely to have an impact on rates of retention/returning to the profession.

There was suspicion, however, as to whether the Workload Review Group recommendations would really be implemented, and as such there could be a need to review progress across schools and support schools in communicating their workload reduction successes. Schools may also need support in

overcoming some of the practical challenges of reducing workload.

### Possible solutions

With the above in mind, let us now consider in greater depth some possible solutions to this problem. In particular, we will explore the following:

- Pay and conditions.
- Leadership practices.
- Teacher training and CPD.
- Career progression and professional recognition.

### Pay and conditions

As we have seen, workload – while a vital aspect – is not the only factor that drives teachers out. Pay and conditions are also key.

#### Solution 1: The nature of teachers' workloads

A recent UCL Institute of Education survey of around 1,200 current and former teachers found that it was the nature rather than the quantity of workload that was the crucial factor in driving teachers out of the classroom (Perryman & Calvert, 2019).

Underlying teachers' decisions to quit, the report says, is a perceived contradiction between expectations and reality. Many of those surveyed imagined, before they started, that they could cope with the workload, but once in the classroom, a general lack of support from middle and senior leaders, together with the effects of a high-stakes accountability system, were far worse than they had thought.

The general response from government is that teaching will be improved by reducing workload, removing unnecessary tasks and increasing pay. This may help, says the UCL, but its survey also indicates that part of the problem lies within the culture of teaching – the constant scrutiny, the need to perform, and hyper-critical management. Reducing workload alone will not address these issues.

The UCL findings illustrate the link between workload fears and the reality of working within what the report authors call “the accountability performativity context”. They state: “Those who want to be teachers are committed to the profession and yet, somehow, that commitment is eroded in a very short space of time.”

This notion of an “accountability performativity context” is echoed in the NFER report, *Early career CPD*

(Walker et al, 2018), which argues that the translation of hopes and expectations to lived experiences of teaching leads to “practice shock”, summarised by one participant as: “When you go through your (ITT) placements, you can't truly understand how much work there is to do, or how much responsibility comes with the job (which) hit me hard in the NQT year.”

Unless such issues are addressed, the report says, there is a high risk of new teachers walking away from the profession before they might have anticipated doing so. To help, the report said that early career teachers should have access to:

- A supportive mentor who is ideally a subject specialist and respected by the mentee as a practitioner in the classroom.
- A balanced package of support involving a standardised training programme alongside more personalised, teacher-led opportunities.
- A supportive school culture.

#### Solution 2: Flexible working

According to the *Factors affecting teacher retention report* (DfE 2018a), flexible working and part-time contracts are also viewed positively by teachers and likely to improve recruitment and retention. Some viewed these as a way to secure a better work/life balance.

A “sympathetic timetable” (e.g. focusing on fewer year groups as an early career teacher) was viewed positively by around one-third of secondary teachers. Questions to consider include how flexibility can be offered to early career teachers who want broader teaching experience, how pastoral responsibilities could be gently phased in, and how these could be managed practically in school.

#### Solution 3: Pay

A Learning Policy Institute paper from the US, entitled *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it* (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), points out that previous research indicates teachers are more likely to continue teaching and stay at their schools when their wages increase and are comparable with job opportunities in other industries.

In addition to wage comparability, data from the US National Center for Education Statistics' five-year longitudinal study show that teachers whose first-year salary was



“When teachers strongly disagree that their administration is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching”

less than US\$40,000 (€31,000) had an attrition rate 10 percentage points higher than teachers who earned more in their first year.

Fair pay is clearly a factor in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers but the fact there is little data from the UK linking pay with recruitment and retention suggests that it is by no means the most important aspect affecting turnover.

#### Solution 4: School facilities

In a paper entitled *The effects of school facility quality on teacher retention in urban school districts* (Buckley et al, 2004), the authors posit that the quality of school facilities is a significant – albeit often

overlooked – cause of teachers quitting. They investigated the importance of facility quality using data from a survey of K12 (compulsory education) teachers in Washington DC, and found in their sample that facility quality was an important predictor of the decision of teachers to leave their position. Here, the availability of resources such as textbooks and stationery, the quality of light and heat, and the general attractiveness of the teaching environment were drivers.

#### Leadership practices Solution 5: Leadership support

In a paper entitled *Is the grass greener beyond teaching?* (Bamford & Worth, 2017) published as part of the NFER's Teacher Retention and Turnover Research, the authors argue that there is a strong relationship between teacher job satisfaction and the leadership quality in their school, and that leadership is also associated with the extent to which teachers regard their workload as manageable.

The report concludes that nurturing, supporting, and valuing teachers is vital to keep their job

satisfaction and engagement high and improve their retention in the profession.

Senior leaders, the authors argue, should regularly monitor the job satisfaction and engagement of their staff.

And according to *Factors affecting teacher retention* (DfE 2018a), greater levels of support and understanding from senior leadership teams is needed, for example, in terms of the management of pupil behaviour, and the ability to have open and honest conversations. This will help support teachers' relationships with their senior leaders and reduce feelings of pressure in terms of scrutiny, accountability and workload.

#### Solution 6: Encouragement and clarity of expectations

Meanwhile, back in the Learning Policy Institute paper (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), school leadership, collegial relationships, and school culture are of particular importance to teacher retention.

Their analysis found that the workplace condition most

predictive of teacher turnover in the US was a perceived lack of administrative support, a construct that measures how teachers rate an administrator's ability to encourage and acknowledge staff, communicate a clear vision, and generally run a school well.

When teachers strongly disagree that their administration is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching than when they strongly agree that their administration is supportive.

While only a small body of research links headteachers directly to student achievement (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2009; Hallinger & Heck, 1996), a much larger research base documents headteachers' effects on school operations, through motivating teachers and students, identifying and articulating vision and goals, developing high performance expectations, fostering communication, allocating resources, and developing organisational structures to support instruction and learning (see for example, Knapp et al, 2006; Leithwood et al, 2004).

#### Teacher training and CPD Solution 7: ITT

The Learning Policy Institute paper I cite above also finds that teachers' ITT route influences their subsequent retention rates.

Those who entered the profession through what the paper called “an alternative certification programme” – what we might equate to non-university routes into teaching such as School Direct or SCITT – are, the research says, 25 per cent more likely to leave their schools than full-time teachers who entered teaching through a regular certification programme.

These findings, the research argues, are not surprising. Studies of the relationship between teacher training and teacher retention suggest teachers with the least preparation are two to three times more likely to leave the profession than those with the most comprehensive preparation – including student teaching and courses in teaching methods.

Quite often, the paper suggests, teachers choose alternative certification pathways because, without financial aid, they cannot afford to be without an income for the time it takes to undergo teacher training. Furthermore, candidates are less likely to be willing to go into debt for training if the financial rewards of the occupation are lower.

It must therefore be made equally – or at least fairly – financially viable to train to be a teacher via every route and every route must offer parity of quality and fully prepare trainees for the classroom. Talking of which...

Teachers who graduate from traditional university-based programmes have lower attrition rates than teachers with other, non-traditional forms of preparation (Harris et al, 2003, cited in Buckley et al, 2004).

A large percentage of new teachers also report that the teacher preparation programmes they went through did not provide enough help for them to cope with their first-year experience, which intensifies the need for proper mentoring, CPD, and administrative support in their working environment (Tapper, 1995, cited in Buckley et al, 2004).

#### Solution 8: Investment in CPD

The Education Policy Institute's (EPI) Peter Sellen told the House of Commons Education Select

Committee (2017) that “60 per cent of teachers agreed that one of the key barriers to accessing professional development was their work schedule”.

The pressure on teachers' time can mean CPD is squeezed out of timetables and not prioritised.

ITT typically lasts for just one year and must cover a wide range of skills in this period. CPD should follow on from this and act as on-going training throughout teachers' careers to improve their practice, develop new skills and maintain subject knowledge.

However, the Education Select Committee's report (2017) argues that currently the teaching profession in England lacks clear, structured provision for CPD and a number of barriers act to reduce the amount of CPD done by teachers.

This comes after a TDT and SchoolDash analysis found that primary schools in England cut their CPD budgets by seven per cent and secondary schools by 12 per cent between 2016 and 2017 (Hannay, 2019).

As well as struggling to find time for CPD, the current nature of the accountability system – the Education Select Committee report argues – means senior leaders can be reluctant to release staff from the classroom.

The Mathematical Association described the situation to the committee thus: “Secondary and FE-level schools are regularly unwilling and unable to release staff to attend professional development. Losing class time with high stakes exam classes is not permitted and funding is not available to support attendance to training events.”

“We have experience of even free high-quality training events being cancelled due to lack of delegates, not because teachers did not want to attend but because they were not allowed to by their schools.”

As well as CPD being available, therefore, teachers must be given time to attend training.

Analysis by the EPI of the Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2013 (TALIS) showed that the number of days of CPD that English teachers carried out was fewer than most other OECD countries (Sellen, 2016). On average, English teachers spent four days doing CPD in one year, whereas teachers in Singapore spent 12 days and South Korea 15 days.

This is perhaps unsurprising, ➤

the Education Select Committee says in its report, when you consider that teachers in Singapore are entitled to 100 hours of CPD per year, whereas England has no such entitlement. Singapore is not alone with this kind of commitment. Closer to home, Scottish teachers are entitled to 35 hours of CPD per year.

The EPI's analysis (Zucollo, 2019) of the latest TALIS results in 2019 reminds us: "The OECD find a particularly strong relationship in England between teachers' job satisfaction and participation in professional development."

### Solution 9: CPD quality and relevance

In addition to the availability of CPD and the opportunity being afforded to teachers to attend training courses, the quality of CPD is also crucial to improving teacher retention.

This, too, was raised at the Education Select Committee report hearings (2017) as an essential factor to teacher professionalism. Experts from the UCL Institute for Education told the committee that "evidence suggests the best CPD is long-term, interspersed with episodes of practice, individually tailored and informed and challenged by external expertise".

Schools deliver a lot of their CPD in-house, which can be very effective, but, the committee's report says, external expertise is often beneficial too.

Professor Sir John Holman, president of the Royal Society of Chemistry, told the MPs on the committee that "by and large, schools put a greater emphasis on generic things".

Some generic CPD, for example behaviour management, is very important. However, Dr Robin Bevan, headteacher at Southend High School for Boys, told the MPs: "Nearly all – and I am going to be a little mischievous in my description but I think it is fair – CPD currently being provided is driven by regulatory or statutory frameworks, so that is curriculum change, Ofsted, Prevent training. Subject-specific CPD is necessary to develop specific skills related to the teaching of a subject, maintenance or acquisition of subject knowledge, and to improve practice."

One of the main reasons teachers intend to leave the profession, the committee found, is a lack of job

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satisfaction, and not feeling supported in their profession. Charles Tracy from the Institute of Physics told MPs: "If (school leaders) provide a culture of professional development and professional support for their staff, the staff will stay in the school – and it works for them as well as the national system where they will stay in education."

The committee also heard that teachers who are less supported and less professionally confident are more likely to find their workload unmanageable, a key factor of teachers leaving the profession.

A professional learning culture and support for teachers may also help improve the status of the profession, something which was a recurring theme of the committee's inquiry.

### Solution 10: Tailored support for new teachers

According to *Factors affecting teacher retention* (DfE, 2018a), teachers felt strongly that – in addition to the above – further subject specialist support for early career teachers was needed, particularly around mentoring, providing networks and resources, and using a database to track teachers and offer additional support if they decide to leave.

As previously touched upon, concerns included not duplicating what was already available, having the time to use elements of the support package, confidentiality and independence of mentors, and the availability of mentors at a suitable time prior to making a decision to leave. Some also suggested the support package would be useful for those slightly later in their careers.

### Career progression and professional recognition

**Solution 11: Career progression opportunities**  
In a report entitled *Leading together:*

*Why supporting school leadership matters* (Teach First, 2018), it is argued that nurturing existing talent in schools could help address the leadership shortage and help retain teachers in the profession.

The report claims that nine in 10 (88 per cent) teachers say that if their school were to offer excellent leadership development opportunities this would have some impact on their likelihood of remaining at their school, with a third of teachers (34 per cent) saying it would have a great impact. Importantly, this rises to 41 per cent among those teachers who are considering leaving the profession within the next year.

The Teach First report goes on to say that offering meaningful development opportunities to those not yet in senior leadership – either middle leaders or classroom teachers with the potential to step-up – provides an opportunity to improve retention and keep talented people in schools.

Leadership development provides teachers with an additional incentive to stay in education, rather than seeking progression opportunities elsewhere. Providing teachers with a positive and supportive culture of learning and development could, therefore, support with morale and retention.

The *Factors affecting teacher retention* report (DfE, 2018a), says that there is evidence that the availability of wider progression opportunities may also help support retention.

This could be supported by communicating examples of how multi-academy trusts (MATs) have developed alternative subject progression pathways, exploring transferability to other schools and supporting schools to consider job role swaps.

### Solution 12: Professional recognition

In a discussion paper entitled *Why teach?* (Menzies et al, 2015), the authors argue that teachers who stay in the profession do so largely because they consider themselves to be good at it and because they enjoy making a difference to pupils' lives. Retention, therefore, depends on ensuring teachers feel they can have an impact: letting them "get on with it" is therefore key in maintaining a motivated and committed workforce.

The paper draws heavily on



“Teachers who are less supported and less professionally confident are more likely to find their workload unmanageable”

research carried out by the NFER (Gould et al, 2000) which outlined four reasons that teachers remain in the profession:

- Recognition of their work.
- Pupil development and learning.
- Manager approval.
- Family and friends.

Similarly, Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003) find that job satisfaction depends on providing greater intellectual challenge, autonomy and the opportunity to spend sufficient time with students.

Birkeland and Johnson (2003), meanwhile, argue that teachers tend to stay in post when they can pursue professional growth and development, something particularly important to new or early career teachers.

A deeply rooted culture of professionalism can therefore ensure that even socio-

economically disadvantaged schools retain teachers through "supportive administrators and colleagues, clear expectations for students and safe, orderly environments".

In the paper *Engaging teachers* (Lynch et al 2016), the authors claim that the more engaged teachers are, the less likely they are to consider leaving. Their research, based on responses to the NFER Teacher Voice surveys in November 2015 and March 2016, suggests that a majority (90 per cent) of teachers who report being "engaged" are not considering leaving, compared with only a quarter of "disengaged" teachers. But not all teachers in the survey fitted this pattern.

Ten per cent of engaged teachers are considering leaving, and five per cent had also identified an alternative destination, so seem more certain about their decision.

The report suggests that effort be

targeted at keeping the engaged teachers feeling valued and satisfied in their roles. Re-engaging ambivalent teachers could also help teacher retention.

A third of ambivalent teachers in the survey are considering leaving, and as a third of teachers overall made up this group, that is approximately 10 per cent of teachers who could potentially be retained if re-engaged. A quarter of disengaged teachers in the survey have no intention of leaving.

It is perhaps not surprising that three-quarters of the disengaged teachers are considering leaving. Given the research evidence of the relationship between engagement factors and teacher quality, it may not be a negative consequence for the teaching profession if disengaged teachers leave.

However, there could be opportunities within the sector to re-engage this group.

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