

The pandemic and teacher attrition: an exodus waiting to happen?[†]

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The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in teachers' workloads, lower levels of happiness and wellbeing, and a rise in anxiety and stress. These factors, among others, could make teachers want to leave the profession. In America, for example, there are concerns that Covid-19 has led to a mass exodus of school leaders and teachers.

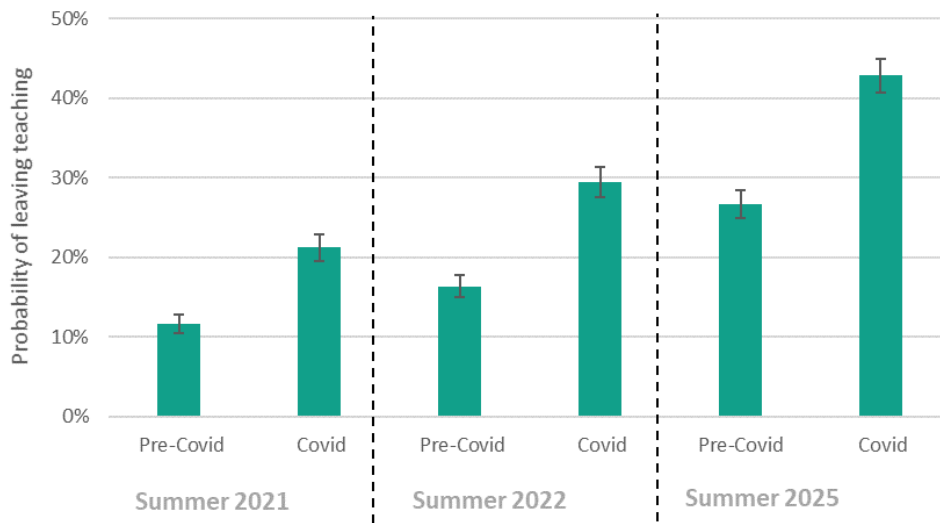
In January 2021, we surveyed 2,000 teachers across the UK to investigate the effect that Covid-19 has had on their intentions to leave the profession. Respondents were asked how likely they are to leave teaching in the short term (by summer 2021 and summer 2022) and longer term (by summer 2025). In addition, they were asked to retrospectively report the likelihood that they would leave the profession before Covid-19. Our results show that teachers are now almost twice as likely to leave as they were before the pandemic.

Teachers' intentions to leave the profession by this summer (2021) have increased by 9 percentage points (12 percent to 21 percent), 13 percentage points by the summer of 2022 (16 percent to 29 percent) and 16 percentage points by the summer of 2025 (27 percent to 43 percent).

[†]This analysis was published by the Education Policy Institute on the 16th of June 2021. Source: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-pandemic-and-teacher-attrition-an-exodus-waiting-to-happen/> see: Fullard (2021a).

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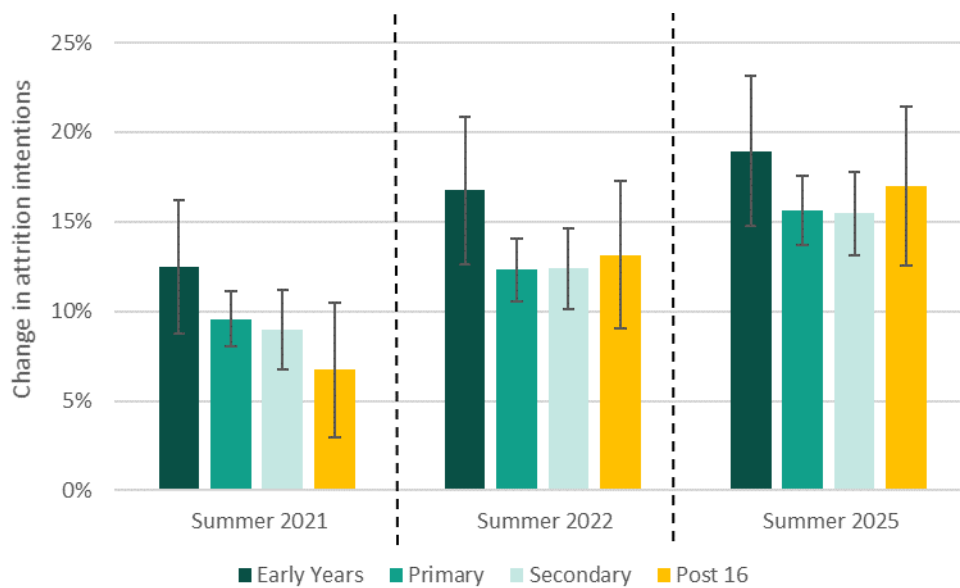
Classroom teachers reported likelihood that they will leave the profession by the summer of 2021, 2022 and 2025



Note: error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

The effect on teachers' intentions to leave the profession has increased across every school phase. While the effects are largely similar, the increase does appear to be slightly larger for those who work in early years, a 12 percentage point increase (11 percent to 23 percent) in the short run and a 19 percentage point increase (27 percent to 46 percent) in the longer run. This possibly reflects the fact that there has been a lot of instability in the early years setting.

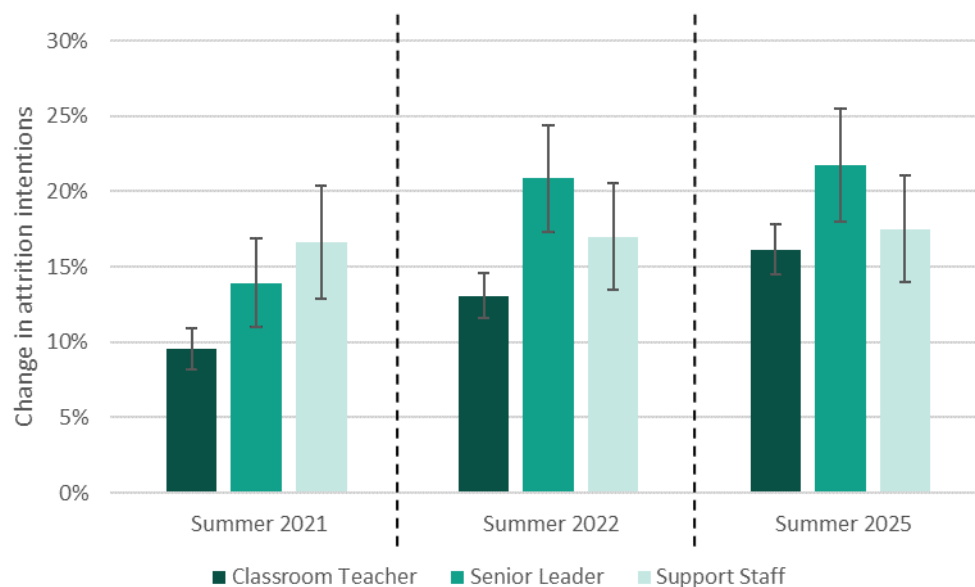
The change in attrition intentions by school phase



Note: error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

It is not just classroom teachers who have reported that they are more likely to leave the school workforce. We observe large effects for both senior leaders and support staff on the likelihood that they will leave this summer (14 and 17 percentage points respectively) and by the summer of 2025 (22 and 17 percentage points). Consequently, the likelihood that senior leaders will leave the profession by the summer of 2025 has increased to 50 percent.

The change in attrition intentions across the school workforce

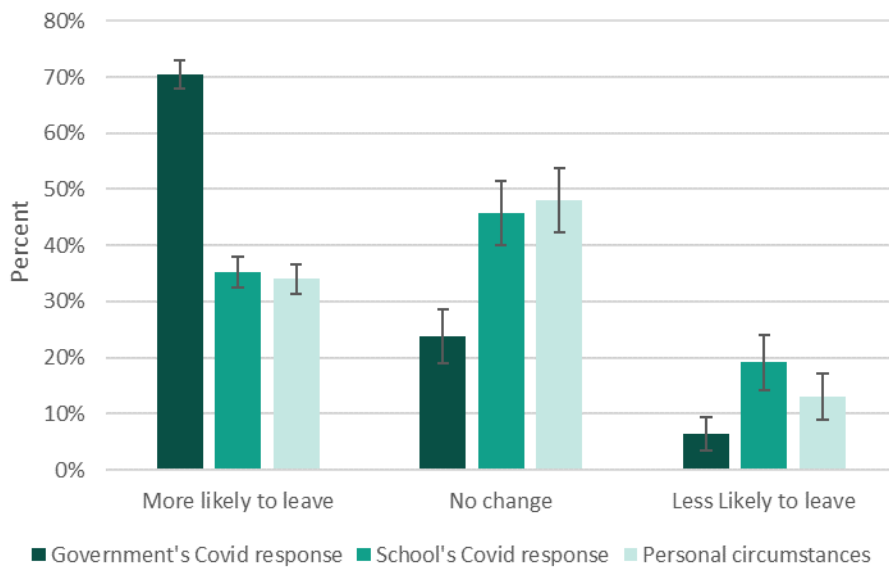


Note: error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

When asked about the potential causes, 71 percent of classroom teachers reported that the government's handling of Covid-19 has made them more likely to leave. Only 6 percent said that the government's response has made them less likely to leave.

Other factors, including how their school has responded to Covid-19 and teachers' personal circumstances, have both increased (35 percent and 34 percent respectively) and decreased (19 percent and 13 percent) the likelihood that they will leave the profession.

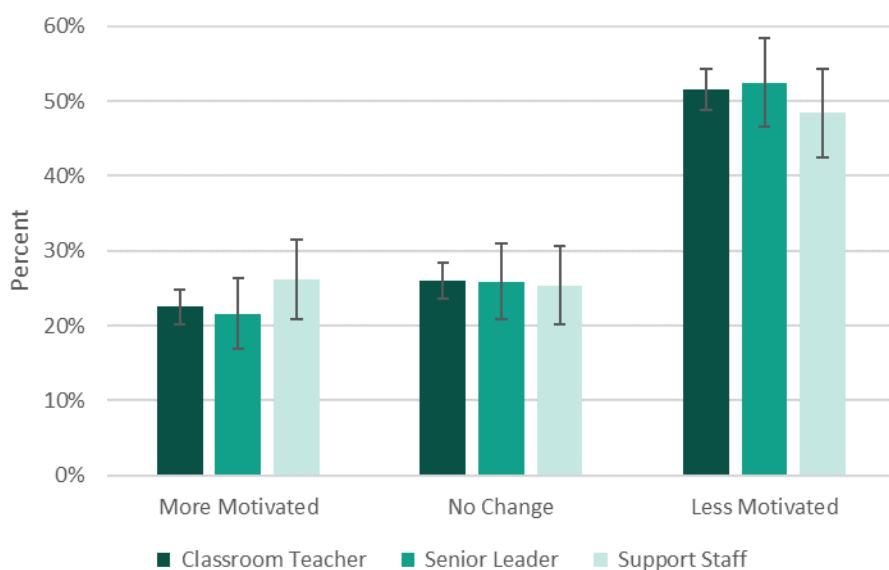
The effect of different factors on teachers' attrition intentions



Note: error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Respondents were also asked about how Covid-19 has impacted their motivation in the classroom. In response to the question “Thinking about your motivation to teach, how would you say Covid-19 has impacted your motivation in the classroom”, 52 percent of classroom teachers reported that they are less motivated (24 percent slightly lower, 13 percent moderately lower and 15 percent much lower). As empirical evidence shows that teacher motivation affects the development of their pupils’ cognitive skills and wellbeing in England, this is only going to reinforce the negative effects from lost learning (Fullard 2019).

The school workforce is less motivated



Note: error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

The DfE have recently made a range of policy changes that are likely to affect the supply of teachers. These include reducing bursary payments, cutting early career payments, and deferring an increase in teachers starting salaries. In the context of a recession which leads to a natural increase in the number of graduates interested in a career in teaching, reducing expenditure on incentives to recruit and retain teachers does seem efficient in the short term.¹

We have seen an unprecedented surge in the number of applicants to teacher training programmes which has caused the DfE to meet overall recruitment targets for the first time in eight years.² However, this boost will be short-lived; as the economy recovers, the interest in teaching and teacher training will return to pre-Covid-19 levels.

Ordinarily we would expect a period of low economic activity to also reduce teacher attrition. People tend to be less likely to leave a job when there are fewer alternative employment opportunities. However, the current situation is unique because the labour market conditions are caused by a global pandemic, and our results suggest that other factors that are related to the pandemic have made teachers almost twice as likely to leave.

The data that we use is on teachers' attrition expectations and not their actual behaviour. While expectations are shown to predict actual behaviour in a variety of settings (e.g. Delavande and Manski (2010), Delavande and Zafar (2019)) other factors such as the vaccination rollout and lack of alternative high-quality employment are likely to mitigate the effects in the short run. Nevertheless, we do expect Covid-19 to negatively affect teacher attrition over the next few years.

With all of this in mind policymakers should urgently:

1. Reinstate their policies related to teacher retention, such as additional top-up payments, both for those who are new to the profession and existing teachers.
2. Review its outdated pay policy, that fails to account for regional differences in local labour market conditions, to improve recruitment and retention (Fullard 2021b, Fullard and Zuccollo 2021).

¹ See Fullard (2018) for a discussion on how the financial crisis effected the enrolment of graduates onto teacher training programmes in England.

² See Fullard (2020a) for a summary on the effect of Covid-19 on teacher recruitment and Fullard (2020b) for a summary on the latest trends in teacher diversity in England.

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