

Teacher recruitment rise is great but retention is key

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18th of June 2020

Teacher retention figures over the last few years paint a bleak picture for what is one of society's most important professions.

More than 36,000 classroom teachers leave the profession each year. Recruitment figures don't look much better. Every year since 2012, fewer people are going into teaching than the Department for Education estimates are required to meet current and future needs and this gap has grown year on year.

In addition, many of those who do go into teaching don't stick around – one in five new teachers leaves after two years and one in three leaves after five years.

[†]This analysis was published by the Times Educational Supplement on the 18th of June 2021. Source: <https://www.tes.com/news/teacher-recruitment-up-retention-issue-epi>.

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An unexpected boost

With secondary school pupil numbers expected to rise by as much as 10 per cent over the next few years, the demand for teachers is only going to increase making recruitment and retention challenges more acute.

Recognising these challenges the government has introduced various policies designed to deal with recruitment and retention such as the new Early Career Framework (ECF) and accountability changes, as well as a commitment to increasing the starting salary for teachers to £30,000 by 2022, an increase of 23 per cent.

However, the government is likely to receive an unexpected boost in teacher numbers to help fill the gap before its planned policies have an impact.

Historically, teacher shortages tend to be worse in periods of economic prosperity and less severe during economic downturns because occupations such as teaching, whose need for workers is largely unaffected by a recession, become relatively more attractive .

As jobs dry up and wages fall, graduates are drawn to the job security and stable wages that teaching has to offer. In response to the 2008 financial crisis, more than 4,500 additional graduates went into teaching.

Although the economic impact of Covid-19 is unlikely to be as persistent as the financial crisis, the Covid-19 bump could still reduce teacher recruitment shortages back to 2015-16 levels.

A big reduction

We estimate that Covid-19 will reduce recruitment shortages by between 20 and 40 per cent each year over the next two years .

While the latest data from universities admission body Ucas does suggest that Covid-19 has had an immediate impact on enrolment onto initial teacher training programs (ITT), we would expect the main increase in enrolment to start in the 2020-21 round.

Following the 2008 recession, ITT enrolment did not peak until the 2009/10 application round, which started more than one year after the recession struck. In addition, the difficulty of obtaining a job during a recession may also keep thousands of teachers in the occupation who would have otherwise left.

However the fact that fewer teachers are leaving and a reluctance of schools to recruit because of the uncertainty over how they will operate in September might mitigate any boost in teacher numbers as many ITT providers are currently struggling to place new recruits.

The recession caused by Covid-19 is going to bring many graduates into teaching who would have otherwise never considered becoming a teacher.

Although these graduates will make an important social contribution, which is especially timely given the secondary pupil bulge, this is only likely to be a short term boost rather than

a long term solution. Many of these young people will inevitably leave teaching when other job opportunities become available.

Similarly, many of the teachers who changed their mind about quitting and did not leave teaching during the recession might be delaying their decision, rather than changing it entirely.¹

Battles still to be fought

Despite the uptick in teacher numbers over the next few years, it is important that the government remains committed to dealing with recruitment and retention challenges by pressing ahead with existing policy commitments.

However, even with the Covid-19 boost, shortages are likely to persist in the immediate future.

Therefore policymakers should consider using relatively inexpensive wage incentives to help fill the gap, in the most challenging areas, before the hoped-for effects of the ECF and accountability changes.

These retention incentives such as £2,000 per year to existing early career teachers in shortage subjects and doubling the extra payments for teaching in challenging areas would especially benefit students from less affluent backgrounds who, might otherwise, not be taught by a subject specialist qualified teaching professional.

Bibliography

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¹ See Fullard (2021b) for a summary of the impact of the pandemic on teacher attrition.