



National Audit Office



REPORT

Teacher workforce: secondary and further education

Department for Education

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Key facts

217,600

full-time equivalent number of secondary teachers in 2023/24, 1,500 more than in 2022/23

£700mn

the Department for Education's (DfE's) estimated total budget for recruitment and retention initiatives in secondary schools and further education colleges in 2024-25

62%

percentage of target met for the number of secondary school postgraduate initial teacher trainees in 2024/25

Recruitment and retention

6,500

additional new teachers pledged over the course of this Parliament for schools and further education colleges

5.1

of 100 teaching roles vacant in general further education colleges, and 1.8 of 100 in sixth-form colleges, in 2022/23

1

number of times DfE has met its recruitment target for secondary school postgraduate initial teacher trainees in the past 10 years

Teacher numbers

54,000

headcount number of teachers in further education colleges in 2022/23, 2,000 more than in 2021/22

Between

8,400

and 12,400

number of additional teachers DfE estimates colleges will need by 2028/29 to meet demographic pressures and offer T Levels

1,600

number of additional secondary teachers DfE currently estimates will be needed between 2023/24 and 2027/28 to meet the demand from growing pupil numbers

Teacher pay

5.5%

fully funded pay award for all schoolteachers in 2024/25

c £10,000

difference in median salary between secondary teachers and teachers in further education colleges in 2022/23

Throughout this report, central government financial years are written as, for example, '2024-25' and run from 1 April to 31 March. Academic years are written '2024/25' and run from 1 September to 31 August for schools and 1 August to 31 July for colleges.

Summary

1 The Department for Education (DfE) considers that the school and college workforce will impact the Government's ability to achieve its growth and opportunities missions first set out in summer 2024. It has focused on having enough high-quality teachers across all subjects and in all parts of the country. This relies on both high-quality teaching, which DfE sees as the factor within schools and colleges that has the biggest impact on educational outcomes, and there being enough teachers. Teacher shortages can impact quality if schools and further education colleges then use non-specialist or supply teachers, have larger class sizes, or limit the subjects offered. DfE currently sees not having enough teachers as a significant issue impacting educational outcomes for children and young people.

2 In 2023/24, there were 217,600 teachers across 3,450 secondary schools, with 54,000 teachers in 230 further education colleges in 2022/23.¹ Across both settings, teacher recruitment and retention has been a challenge. In secondary schools, pupil-teacher ratios have increased, and DfE has missed all but one of its targets for postgraduates starting teacher training since 2015/16. Over the next three years, DfE expects to need more secondary teachers as student numbers rise. These students may then move into further education. In July 2024, the new Government pledged to recruit an additional 6,500 teachers for schools and further education colleges by the end of this Parliament (spring 2029 at the latest).

3 DfE is accountable for securing value for money from the funding it provides schools and further education colleges across England. Educational settings are responsible for planning, recruiting and managing their own workforces, with DfE responsible for the overall system and national approach. This includes setting pay ranges for secondary school teachers, but not for teachers in further education colleges.

4 In 2019, DfE published its first teacher recruitment and retention strategy, covering schools. It set out its vision to make teaching careers attractive, rewarding and sustainable, through more supportive school cultures and reduced workload; better early career support; making sure teaching remains attractive; and making it easier to become a teacher. We estimate that DfE budgeted to spend £700 million on recruitment and retention initiatives covering secondary schools and further education colleges in 2024-25.

¹ Further education colleges include general further education colleges (specialist and tertiary providers) and sixth-form colleges. Independent training providers and other publicly funded providers are excluded.

Focus of our report

5 This report assesses whether DfE is achieving value for money through its work to recruit and retain teachers in state-funded secondary schools and further education colleges (including sixth-form colleges) in England. Demand for teachers across these settings is increasing, as the number of pupils continues to rise and is expected to peak in secondary schools in 2028. We do not consider other settings, such as primary schools or independent training providers. We look at teacher numbers, rather than whether teachers deliver good-quality teaching, but recognise both are needed for DfE to achieve its objectives. We also only look at teaching roles, rather than leadership or teaching assistants, as teachers represent the largest group of staff. This report examines DfE's:

- understanding of the teacher workforce needs across secondary schools and further education colleges (Part One); and
- pay, financial and non-financial initiatives to address recruitment and retention needs, and how it brings these together (Part Two).

We set out our audit approach and methodology in Appendix One. Appendix Two provides a list of the initiatives included in our estimate of DfE's £700 million budget for 2024-25.

Key findings

Sufficiency of teachers in secondary schools and further education colleges

6 **There is a longstanding nationwide teacher shortage, particularly in further education colleges, with teacher numbers not increasing in line with pupil numbers.** Between 2015/16 and 2023/24, secondary teacher numbers increased by 3% to 217,600, compared with a 15% rise in secondary school pupils to 3.7 million. In 2023/24, 46% of secondary schools reported at least one teaching position vacant. DfE expects secondary school pupil numbers to grow until 2028, subsequently contributing to more students in further education colleges, which face significant challenges recruiting teachers. In 2022/23, 5.1 of 100 teaching posts were vacant in general further education colleges, and 1.8 of 100 in sixth-form colleges. The teacher vacancy rate was 0.7% in secondary schools (paragraphs 1.8, 1.13 and 1.15, and Figure 2).

7 Teacher numbers have been impacted by challenges in both recruiting and retaining teachers. DfE struggles to attract postgraduates into secondary school teaching. For all but one of the past 10 years, DfE has missed its target for postgraduates starting training to become secondary school teachers, achieving between 48% and 87% of its target. Also, not all those who complete their training go into teaching in the state-funded sector in England, with DfE estimating 76% of those finishing in the 2022/23 academic year going on to teach in state-funded schools within 16 months. The number of qualified teachers leaving secondary schools has started to increase to pre-pandemic levels. In 2022/23, 19,900 teachers left, compared with 18,500 in 2018/19, with the retention rate lower across education compared with other sectors. Retaining teachers early in their career is challenging – just over one-third of secondary teachers leave within five years of qualification. In 2024, 84% of teachers who had left in the preceding year described high workload as a reason for leaving, in a survey by DfE, with 75% citing stress and/or wellbeing (paragraphs 1.9 to 1.11, 2.17 and 2.24).

8 Recruitment and retention challenges are worse for certain subjects, and schools in deprived areas. In 2024/25, DfE failed to meet its targets for those starting their initial teacher training in 13 out of 18 secondary subjects, for example, in physics (31% of target met), computing (37% of target met), and modern foreign languages (43% of target met). It exceeded targets for classics, history, biology, physical education and English. Schools with higher levels of disadvantaged pupils tend to have greater staff turnover and unfilled vacancies. In 2023/24, secondary schools with the highest percentage of disadvantaged pupils had 34% of teachers with up to five years' experience, compared with 20% in schools with the lowest percentage of disadvantaged pupils (paragraphs 1.9 and 1.12, and Figure 4).

9 DfE has a good understanding of secondary school teacher numbers, but its modelling of future requirements does not build in known shortages, nor indicate the total number of teachers needed. Since 2010, DfE has collected information on teachers in state-funded schools through an annual census. It uses this to build a comprehensive picture of teacher numbers and to understand, for example, subject-specific shortages, and teachers' qualifications and working patterns. DfE feeds information into a model which it uses to estimate the number of qualified teachers, and sets an annual target for the number starting postgraduate initial teacher training. It does not set targets for the number of teachers it will recruit through other routes. The model assumes that current teacher numbers meet existing demand and does not fully reflect where fewer people than targeted start initial teacher training (paragraphs 1.16 to 1.18, and Figure 5).

10 Because of a lack of data, DfE is not yet able to use its further education workforce demand model to identify how many teachers colleges need to recruit.

DfE has less mature and comprehensive data for further education than for schools. DfE has overseen further education colleges since July 2016, and started a workforce data collection in 2020, publishing it from 2021/22. Before this, DfE collected workforce data through smaller sector surveys. A smaller proportion of further education colleges (94.0% in 2022/23) has provided data compared with schools (99.7%), but DfE expects this to improve as colleges become familiar with the mandatory requirements. DfE has developed a model to project the teachers required, based on student number projections. It compares this with actual teacher numbers in 2020/21, rather than more recent numbers. DfE does not currently use the model to set targets for how many teachers it needs in further education colleges, and most of the model assumptions are based on incomplete data. DfE uses the model to provide contextual information when preparing business cases and spending review bids (paragraphs 1.14, 1.16, 1.19 and 1.20, and Figure 5).

Recruitment and retention initiatives

11 Evidence suggests pay increases have more impact on teacher numbers than other initiatives, but there are affordability implications and teachers' real-terms pay was 10% less in 2024 than in 2010. DfE recognises competitive pay as its strongest lever in influencing teacher recruitment and retention. However, in 2024, real-terms education sector pay was around 10% below 2010 levels, compared with average public sector pay being 2.6% below. Teacher salaries in general further education colleges are around £10,000 below those in secondary schools, making it harder for colleges to attract staff. For 2024/25, the Government fully funded a 5.5% pay award for all schoolteachers, representing an additional £1.2 billion funding. For further education, government has no role in setting pay, and colleges set their own salaries. DfE has given colleges additional funding of £285 million for 2024-25 and £300 million for 2025-26, which they can choose to use to increase pay. However, sector bodies have said that the 2025-26 funding will mostly be used to cover the additional costs resulting from higher student numbers. Any pay decisions will become embedded for future years, so need to be considered from a longer-term affordability perspective (paragraphs 2.3 to 2.7, and Figure 8).

12 In 2024-25, DfE budgeted to spend around £700 million on wide-ranging financial and non-financial initiatives (excluding pay) designed to improve recruitment and retention. Of this, £390 million relates to financial incentives, such as training bursaries and retention incentives. These are often aimed at those teaching specific subjects, with some targeted at those teaching in deprived areas. DfE also has initiatives without financial incentives, such as providing opportunities for professional development. For example, in 2021, DfE introduced a framework to encourage greater consistency in how schoolteachers develop in their first two years of teaching. Fewer initiatives apply to further education colleges than to schools, mainly because DfE has less influence across this sector (paragraphs 1.5, 2.2, 2.8 to 2.12, and 2.19 to 2.30, Figure 1 and Appendix Two).

13 DfE has limited evidence on the effectiveness of initiatives to improve workload or wellbeing, despite these being common reasons for teachers leaving. DfE has good evidence that financial incentives (training bursaries and retention payments) lead to a sustained increase in long-term teacher numbers. However, workload and wellbeing are the issues teachers most commonly cite for leaving the state sector. DfE provides schools and colleges with guidance and support to improve their culture and ways of working, such as around flexible working, but there is less evidence of the effectiveness of this type of initiative (paragraphs 2.10, 2.13, 2.24 to 2.27, and 2.30).

Bringing together initiatives

14 DfE is taking innovative steps to consider challenges across the education sector as a whole and to start comparing the costs and benefits of certain initiatives. In 2019, DfE published a recruitment and retention strategy for schools, reflecting its then approach of considering schools and further education separately. It has started identifying opportunities for a more integrated recruitment approach, such as using digital tools to encourage recruitment across further education and schools. To make better decisions, DfE has also started analysing the value for money of its financial initiatives in secondary schools, to compare the cost-effectiveness of recruiting additional teachers through different routes. For example, it has identified that improving the percentage of trainee teachers who move into the profession would reduce the average cost of recruiting a new teacher and increase overall value for money (paragraphs 1.3, 2.17, 2.19 and 2.32 to 2.36, and Figure 9).

15 Given the upcoming multi-year spending review, DfE has not yet agreed plans setting out how it will achieve, and routinely monitor progress towards, the pledge for 6,500 more teachers. In July 2024, the Government pledged 6,500 new teachers for schools and colleges over the course of this Parliament. Following this announcement, DfE considered a range of levers including pay and financial initiatives, and produced an initial delivery plan in autumn 2024. However, given the upcoming multi-year spending review, DfE has yet to formalise its delivery plans, which will need to align with government funding and wider spending priorities. DfE told us it aims to consider demographic pressures, to best target initiatives where they are needed most, in the context of a constrained fiscal environment. While developing these plans, DfE announced a 5.5% pay increase for all schoolteachers and a package of bursaries and scholarships for initial teacher training. Ten months after the pledge was announced, it currently assesses its confidence in delivering the pledge as significantly challenging given the fiscal context. DfE is considering how to collect data on a more frequent basis than its current annual workforce data collections, to monitor progress towards the pledge (paragraphs 2.38 to 2.42, and Figure 10).

16 The extent to which the pledge for 6,500 more teachers will address current and expected shortages depends on how it will be delivered across schools and further education colleges. DfE is considering how to split the pledge across settings but will not formalise the split until funding has been agreed as part of the spending review. As such, it cannot confirm the extent to which meeting the pledge will provide the teachers needed. Latest figures show that, in 2022/23, there were around 1,500 teacher vacancies and 1,700 temporarily filled posts across secondary schools. DfE told us it estimates that 1,600 more secondary teachers will be needed between 2023/24 and 2027/28 to meet the demand from growing pupil numbers. Also, in 2022/23, there were 2,500 teacher vacancies in further education colleges, with DfE estimating colleges will need between 8,400 and 12,400 more teachers, compared with 2020/21 levels, by 2028/29 (paragraph 2.37).

Conclusion

17 Having enough good-quality teachers is fundamental to achieving positive outcomes for all secondary school and further education students. DfE has taken positive steps in seeking to understand and increase teacher numbers, with a range of initiatives budgeted to cost around £700 million in 2024-25. However, there remains a shortage of teachers, particularly in certain subjects, disadvantaged areas and further education colleges.

18 Looking ahead, secondary school and further education student numbers will rise and DfE has identified not having enough teachers as an ongoing issue. In July 2024, the Government pledged to recruit an additional 6,500 teachers by the end of the current Parliament, but it is not yet clear whether this will fully address current and expected teacher shortages. In developing its plans in line with the June 2025 multi-year spending review, DfE is considering how to split the 6,500 pledge across different educational settings, taking into account the fiscal environment and demographic changes. Following on from this, to be confident of allocating available funding in a way that delivers value for money, it needs to continue building its evidence base and exploring opportunities to consider challenges from a system perspective.

Recommendations

19 To address the continuing challenges with teacher recruitment and retention, and work towards the Government's pledge to recruit an additional 6,500 new teachers, DfE should:

- a** develop cross-sector data and insights across schools and further education colleges, to understand career paths and the unintended impact of sector-focused initiatives, to create a cross-sector approach;
- b** collect more comprehensive data on further education teachers by reiterating the importance of providing data returns, and exploring how to build a historical picture;
- c** as part of its thinking around meeting the 6,500 pledge, fully assess, balance and manage the implications for value for money, affordability, responding to future teaching requirements and demographics, and the extent to which it can deliver its longer-term aims;
- d** following announcement of the multi-year spending review settlement, provide greater transparency around what the 6,500 pledge means in practice for the school and further education sectors, with a published delivery plan setting out objectives, responsibilities, milestones, and how increases will be measured, and subsequently, publicly report on progress;
- e** extend its evidence base of what works to recruit and retain teachers to include non-financial initiatives, and analyse the relative costs and benefits of initiatives to decide where to prioritise resources;
- f** consider what more it can do to encourage those undertaking teacher training to move into teaching jobs in the state-funded sector, and ensure the right type of students enrol on training, particularly for subjects that are seeing the greatest attrition; and
- g** assess the extent to which its further education workforce demand model is fit for purpose and uses the best available data and assumptions, implementing any required changes based on this assessment.