



NFER

National Foundation for
Educational Research



Research Digest



About us

At NFER, our mission is to generate evidence and insights that can be used to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere, and to support positive change across education systems.

Our long history, vast experience and pioneering methods have established our reputation as an authoritative, trusted and respected voice in education. Today that reputation is enhanced with an unmatched depth and breadth of specialist education knowledge, talent and methodological expertise.

We use our expertise to produce high-quality, independent, research and insights to inform key decisions makers about issues across the education system, including:

- Accountability
- Assessment
- Classroom Practice
- Education to Employment
- Social Mobility
- School Funding
- School Workforce
- Systems and Structures

Our clients include government departments and agencies at international, national and local levels, third sector organisations, private and public companies, employers and other organisations with an interest in education. They all benefit from the full range of our expert and professional services.

As an independent, not-for-profit organisation we invest any surplus funds directly back into our programme of research to address key questions in education and increase our impact and support for policy makers and practitioners.





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The ongoing impact of the cost-of-living crisis on schools

Drawing on an online survey of over 1,200 teachers and senior leaders in mainstream schools in March 2024, this report builds on our previous research into the impact of the cost-of-living and explore how these pressures, alongside wider financial pressures, are impacting schools. This research aims to establish:

1. Has the level of need among pupils changed since last year?
2. What support are schools providing and how has this changed over the last year?
3. What is the ongoing impact of cost pressures, including cost-of-living increases, on schools' provision and financial positions?

Key Findings

1. Primary teachers report that the share of pupils coming into schools hungry, without adequate clothing or equipment for lessons continues to increase compared to last year.
2. Around a fifth of primary (19 per cent) and secondary (17 per cent) teachers report spending their own money on meeting pupils' pastoral or welfare needs (such as food or clothing) this year.
3. Around one in four primary teachers and over one in five secondary teachers estimated having spent over £100 of their own money overall so far this academic year (between September 2023 and March 2024).
4. Almost all school senior leaders (93 per cent of primary and 87 per cent of secondary) report making cuts in at least one area in response to cost pressures.
5. Almost half (46 per cent) of primary senior leaders and a third (33 per cent) of secondary senior leaders report making cuts to planned spending on building improvements and new buildings in response to current cost pressures.

Recommendations

It is imperative that the Government prioritises the following:

1. Extend the current eligibility for FSM to ensure pupils in need who do not meet the current eligibility criteria can benefit. At the absolute minimum, this should involve uprating the income threshold for eligibility to reflect inflationary pressures since 2018/19.
2. Provide targeted financial support to help schools address pupils' wellbeing needs, alongside meeting the additional direct costs (e.g. salary and running costs) associated with current cost pressures.
3. Increase the capacity and responsiveness of Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) and the wider support around families to ensure pupils can access the appropriate support and specialist services in a timely manner, rather than schools and teachers having to step in to fill those gaps in support. This could include revisiting current levels of welfare support for families.



The MAT factor

NFER carried out 49 interviews with multi-academy trust (MAT) leaders and school special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) between November 2023 and January 2024. The interviews sought to understand the challenges MATs and schools are facing and the approaches being used across different MATs to support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The study focused primarily on provision within mainstream secondary schools. MATs were selected based on administrative data and web searching, with the intention of identifying MATs with effective SEND provision. The report highlights some of the key perceived benefits of different MATs' approaches to SEND and provides actionable recommendations for MATs and school leaders to further strengthen their support systems.



Key Findings

1. SENCOs reported that workload was a considerable challenge, primarily due to the rise in administrative tasks associated with the growing number of pupils requiring Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs).
2. Respondents spoke highly of the recent introduction of MAT-level SEND leaders, with the report highlighting how they are playing a significant role in helping to deal with a range of challenges. They tend not to mandate particular approaches but provide a vision or a framework across member schools.
3. SENCOs valued the collaboration, learning opportunities and additional resources that MAT membership offered. This was also seen to alleviate the isolation that many SENCOs feel in the role.
4. Interviewees reported inconsistencies between local authorities (LAs) in their capacity to effectively support schools, primarily due to inadequate funding and resources.

Recommendations

1. MAT and school leaders should empower SENCOs as agents of change within their schools.
2. MAT leaders should explore further ways to maximise the benefits of their structures for SEND staff and pupils.
3. MAT and school leaders should strengthen measures to support the mental health and well-being of SENCOs and support staff.
4. Policymakers should prioritise increased funding for the SEND system to address staffing challenges, provide adequate resources for schools and LAs, and support effective provision for pupils with EHCPs.
5. Policymakers should strive to enhance the support provided by LAs by clearly defining expected service standards and ensuring they are met.
6. Policymakers should strengthen mechanisms for promptly recognising SEND during primary education, aiming for early intervention to prevent the exacerbation of pupils' needs and supporting primary-secondary transition.

Teacher Labour Market in England 2024

NFER's annual Teacher Labour Market report, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, monitors the progress the education system in England is making towards meeting the teacher supply challenge by measuring the key indicators of teacher supply and working conditions.

The sixth annual report shows that teacher supply is in a critical state, representing a substantial risk to the quality of education. Initial teacher training (ITT) recruitment this year is likely to continue to fall below what is needed to ensure sufficient staffing levels in schools.

Key Findings

1. Secondary ITT recruitment in 2023/24 reached only half of its target while leaving rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels.
2. ITT applications for 2024/25 so far show slight improvement in some subjects, but not enough to bring secondary recruitment in line with its target.
3. Working hours increased significantly in 2022/23 compared to the previous year, driven in part by worsening pupil behaviour since the pandemic.
4. Last year's pay award helped to stall the real-terms fall in teacher pay since 2010/11. However, teacher pay growth has been outstripped by strong earnings growth since the pandemic in the wider labour market outside teaching.
5. Flexible working has become more common in teaching, but remote and hybrid working is more limited in teaching than in the graduate labour force. Compensating frontline public sector workers could help prevent the lack of remote working from undermining the attractiveness of these jobs.

Recommendations

1. Government should set up an independent review focussing on how to reduce teachers' workload related to behaviour management and pastoral care, which should consider the role of external support services, such as for special needs and mental health.
2. Narrowing the gap between teacher pay growth and the wider labour market is key to supporting recruitment and retention. The 2024 pay award should therefore exceed the 3.1 per cent forecasted rise in earnings in the wider labour market and be fully-funded.
3. Political parties should set out their plans to develop a long-term strategy for pay-setting which reduces the gap in earnings growth with competing occupations, while ensuring that schools have sufficient funding to enact these pay increases without making cuts elsewhere.
4. Political parties should consider introducing a Frontline Workers Pay Premium to compensate public sector workers for the lack of remote and hybrid working opportunities in their jobs compared to the wider graduate labour market.



Ethnic Diversity in the teaching workforce: Evidence review

This review of research identifies the barriers and promising approaches to supporting recruitment, retention and progression of people of colour within the teaching workforce. It was commissioned by Mission 44, a charitable foundation founded by Sir Lewis Hamilton.



Key Findings

1. People of colour are less likely to receive and accept an offer for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) compared with their white peers, but the reasons behind this disparity are unclear.
2. Teacher retention is lower for teachers of colour than for their white counterparts. Beyond high workload, key reasons for leaving include (1) overt and covert racial discrimination; (2) disillusionment with their ability to make a difference for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds; and (3) lack of progression opportunities.
3. Barriers to recruitment, retention and progression coalesce around the unequal treatment of teachers of colour in a system that was not designed to support either ethnic or intersectional diversity. An anti-racist school culture is a key enabler of progression.
4. In England, there are currently no government targets, programmes or funding to improve ethnic diversity in the teaching workforce.
5. While there are promising approaches for improving ethnic diversity, there is a lack of rigorous evidence on their effectiveness.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that attention is focused on making sure schools provide a positive working environment for teachers and leaders from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This includes training for staff, senior leaders and governors and use of whole-school initiatives such as comprehensive EDI policies and improvement plans.
2. Interventions in ITT must be a priority because of the gap in acceptance rates between applicants of colour and their white counterparts.
3. We recommend all ITT programmes include content on anti-racism as part of their curriculum to raise awareness of the issues among all trainees and to support trainee teachers of colour at the beginning of their careers.
4. Government action is important to help drive change across the system. There should be an actionable plan to increase ethnic diversity in the teaching workforce that is reflected in all policies across all parts of the system, accompanied by improvements in data collection and monitoring.

The impact of training bursaries on teacher recruitment and retention

This research provides evidence on the long-term effectiveness of bursaries for improving teacher recruitment and retention and their cost effectiveness compared to other policy options.

The project, funded by the Gatsby Foundation, uses data from the ITT Performance Profiles (ITT-PP) and the School Workforce Census (SWC), to estimate the impact of bursaries on key longer-term teacher outcomes, including qualified teacher status (QTS) achievement, entry into state-sector teaching and retention in the state sector.

Key Findings

1. Bursary increases are associated with increases in recruitment into initial teacher training.
2. Overall, bursary increases are associated with a sustained increase in long-term teacher supply. We find that the additional teachers induced to enter training by a bursary increase tend to complete their training, enter teaching and be retained in teaching at the same rate as other teachers in their cohort.
3. The additional teachers are also more likely to teach in schools that tend to struggle most with filling vacancies, such as schools in London and schools serving disadvantaged communities. Bursaries are therefore an effective policy tool for addressing national teacher shortages and the associated staffing challenges in the most affected schools.
4. We also find that bursaries offer good cost effectiveness compared to other targeted policy measures such as early career payments, especially where the existing bursary for a subject is low.

Recommendations

1. The Government should keep training bursaries in place to ensure ITT recruitment is supported to be higher than it otherwise would be.
2. The Government should continue raising bursaries for subjects experiencing teacher supply challenges and where bursaries are low. Increasing bursaries where there is a small or no existing bursary is more cost effective than when the existing bursary is already at a high level.
3. The Government should maintain high bursaries for maths, physics, chemistry and computing, raising them over time with the level of the teaching starting salary. However, to further boost teacher supply the Government should redesign the 'levelling up premium' early career payments for shortage subjects by widening eligibility to teachers working in all schools nationally and increasing payment generosity to enhance its impact.



Understanding current practice around managing teacher workload

This research, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), explored the nature, prevalence, and impact of teachers' flexible working in schools. The study was conducted between April to September 2023 and involved: a rapid evidence review; analysis of teacher job adverts, School Workforce Census data, and flexible working policies; and interviews with leads from organisations and programmes supporting flexible working in schools.

Key Findings

1. The nature of teacher flexible working in schools in England predominantly involves part-time working, and in a minority of cases teachers work flexibly in other ways, including phased retirement, flexible hours, personal days, and remote working during non-teaching time.
2. Around a fifth to almost a third of teachers in schools in England work part-time. Flexible working is more common among primary teachers than secondary. Flexible working appears to be less common in schools serving more disadvantaged communities.
3. Although there is a lack of evidence that robustly measures the impact of teachers' flexible working, there is considerable perceptual evidence that it supports teachers' job satisfaction, motivation, and expertise, and can lead ultimately to enhanced recruitment, retention and workforce stability.
4. Flexible working in schools can be challenging to organise, though there is evidence that it can be successfully implemented where there is leadership support, fair and transparent processes, and effective timetable management.

Recommendations

1. Policies should continue to encourage school leaders to increase flexible working and support them to overcome the challenges.
2. Management of workload should be considered in effective flexible working practices.
3. Flexible working opportunities need to be available to teachers at all levels so that teachers who wish to work flexibly are not denied the opportunity to progress in their careers.
4. Support could also continue to be developed to facilitate schools' implementation of flexible working in terms of training and guidance, including on logistical and organisational considerations, such as timetabling, HR processes, and effective flexible working practices.
5. The peer-to-peer networks to support flexible working in schools - such as through the Flexible Working Ambassador School (FWAS) and now Flexible Working Ambassador Multi-Academy Trusts and Schools (FWAMS) programmes - appear to be helpful in encouraging the sharing of good practice.



Evaluation of the National Tutoring Programme Year 3

This report summarises the findings from the implementation and process evaluation of the third year of the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) (2022-23). The programme is an important part of the Government's Covid-19 recovery response, offering tuition support to pupils in Years 1-11 who have been hit hardest by the disruption.

Drawing on survey and interview data from participating schools, the report focuses on: the implementation of the NTP in the third year; the extent to which the NTP has supported pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); the benefits and perceived impact of the NTP; and the extent to which the NTP is supporting tuition being embedded within the school system.

Key Findings

1. There was high satisfaction for the NTP overall, across its different routes, and with different aspects of delivery of the programme.
2. There was a strong perception amongst school staff of impact of the NTP on pupil self-confidence, attainment, and on them catching up with their peers.
3. At the time of the evaluation, leaders felt that tutoring was integrated and part of schools' daily provision or support offer, enabled by NTP funding.
4. The majority of school leaders wanted to continue with the NTP, but its future sustainability was considered questionable given the funding subsidy was reducing in 2023-24 and then ceasing in 2024-25.

Recommendations

1. NFER recommends a change to the funding model is considered to allow schools to use funds without the requirement to top-up from their other already stretched budgets.
2. It is imperative that different aspects of tutoring are evaluated to understand which approaches work best in which circumstances.
3. More detailed evidence on effective approaches will provide policy-makers, Tuition Partners (TPs) and school leaders with clearer guidance on what quality tutoring looks like so they can monitor tutoring to ensure its effectiveness on an on-going basis.
4. DfE should explore how financial support can be sustained to allow tutoring to become a permanent fixture in schools.
5. If the DfE focus is now to shift from an initial Covid-19 recovery response, towards the challenge of tackling the attainment gap more specifically, clear guidance about the prioritisation of disadvantaged students for tutoring should be given.



Impact of Covid-19-related school closures in Key Stage 1 on attainment and social skills of pupils in Year 3 and Year 4 in academic year 2022/2023

This longitudinal study follows a group of the youngest school-aged children during and since the Covid-19 pandemic to understand the long-term impact of Covid-19-related disruption to schools on pupils' attainment and social skills. This report represents the findings from the third year of the study.

The research has been conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), published and funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).



Key Findings

1. The Covid-19 gap appears to have, on average, closed for both Year 3 and Year 4 pupils, in both reading and mathematics.
2. There is a notable proportion of very low attaining pupils in Year 3 reading which is larger than that seen before the pandemic.
3. There is a disadvantage gap for reading in both Year 3 and Year 4 of around seven months' progress and these gaps have not decreased since spring 2021.
4. There is a disadvantage gap for mathematics in both Year 3 and Year 4 of around six months' progress. These gaps have reduced significantly since spring 2021, but remain wider than those reported before the pandemic.
5. Schools reported less disruption to learning in 2022/23 than had been the case in the previous year. For those experiencing disruption, the most commonly reported reasons related to pupils' behaviour and wellbeing.

Recommendations

1. Continuing to track pupils' progress throughout primary school will be important to help schools target further catch-up support appropriately.
2. Policymakers should ensure that schools have the appropriate resources to identify their pupils struggling with learning, and indeed behaviour, and provide targeted support as they progress through primary school.
3. We should continue to track the pupils involved in this study so that interventions and resources based on the learning they have missed are appropriately targeted as they move through school.

Policy options for a long-term, teacher pay and financial incentives strategy

This research examines the forecasted impacts and costs of different levels of pay and financial incentives on teacher supply in England.

The project, funded by the Gatsby Foundation, uses a forecast and simulation model developed by NFER to predict the impact of different pay and financial incentive policy options on recruitment and retention between 2023/24 to 2027/28.

The research suggests a new long-term strategy is required to improve recruitment and retention, based on continually improving the competitiveness of teacher pay, well-targeted financial incentives, alongside action to improve the non-financial attractiveness of teaching.

Key Findings

1. Nominal average teacher pay has grown more slowly compared to wages in the wider economy since 2010. Increasing teacher pay at a higher rate than the expected growth in average earnings would begin to restore relative pay and likely have positive effects on teacher supply.
2. Flattening of the main teacher pay scale by increasing teacher starting salaries at a faster rate than those of more experienced teachers has helped support the Government's ambition to increase teacher starting salaries to £30,000.
3. A bolder option for pay would be to separate the primary and secondary pay scales. Under all of the pay models considered in this analysis, primary teacher targets are met whereas overall secondary recruitment faces significant shortfalls.
4. Bursaries and early career payments boost teacher supply through targeting incentives at subjects and schools where challenges are most acute.

Recommendations

1. The Government should develop and publish a long-term pay and financial incentives strategy that aims to improve the financial competitiveness of teaching over time.
2. The Government should redesign the 'levelling up premium' early career payments by widening eligibility to all schools nationally and increasing payment generosity to enhance its impact, and targeting resource solely towards shortage subjects and schools serving disadvantaged communities.
3. The UK political parties should set out in their 2024 election manifestoes what teacher pay and financial incentive measures they intend to implement to address the teacher supply challenge.
4. As part of its future evidence to STRB, the DfE should commit to publishing full impact assessments of the overall forecasted teacher supply impact of its pay and financial incentive proposals. Where an impact assessment suggests supply is unlikely to be met, the DfE should set out the financial and non-financial actions being taken to improve teacher supply.



The Skills Imperative 2035: Rethinking skills gaps and solutions

Rethinking skills gaps and solutions is the fourth working paper to be published by *The Skills Imperative 2035 programme*, a five-year research programme funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The main report is accompanied by two Technical Supplements.

Rethinking skills gaps and solutions builds on prior research by quantifying the current availability of Essential Employment Skills (EES) amongst the population, by measuring the skills gaps that exist between the EES people possess and the skills requirements of their jobs, and by exploring how these skills gaps might change between now and 2035.

Key Findings

- 13 per cent of workers in 2023 have 'substantial' EES skills deficiencies – meaning the skills requirements of their jobs surpass the skills they possess - which may be jeopardising their ability to fulfil their job requirements effectively.
- Nearly one in five workers in managerial jobs (e.g. HR managers and directors), professional jobs (e.g. accountants) and associate professional occupations (e.g. engineering technicians) have substantial EES skills deficiencies.
- The number of workers in England with 'substantial' EES deficiencies may grow from 3.7 million workers in 2023 up to seven million workers in 2035.
- Self-report data indicates that 14 per cent of workers have substantial EES under-utilisation – that is, the skills they possess are higher than those required to do their jobs. Our analysis shows that skills under-utilisation is more widespread among jobs such as skilled trades, sales, customer services and administration. Tapping into these latent skills will become increasingly important for employers in the future.

Recommendations

1. Employers grappling with skills gaps should consider what more they can do to align expectations and skills assessments between managers and workers across their workforce.
2. Employers should consider what more they can do to support their line managers to identify and utilise the 'latent' EES of their workers, particularly the under-utilised skills of workers in mid- and low skill level occupations.
3. Employers should reflect on the extent to which skills gaps in their organisation could be a consequence of 'skills withdrawal' and how they ensure that working conditions and practices promote organisation commitment, engagement and work effort.
4. Government should further incentivise employer investment in the development of their workforce's EES.
5. The Department for Education (DfE) should consider what more it can do to support education and training providers to adopt the best strategies for assessing and developing people's EES.







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In a world of unprecedented disruption and change, caused by a global pandemic, social upheaval, technological innovation and the climate crisis, it is more important than ever that education policy and practice is informed by high-quality evidence.

NFER exists to create this evidence and get it into the hands of those who can use it to make a difference.

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