

1970s Working Conditions in the 2020s: Modernising the Professional Lives of Teachers for the 21st Century.

Introduction and background

Education Support's Commission on Teacher Retention was launched in December 2022. Its aim was to examine why so many secondary school teachers and leaders in the state sector are leaving the profession. It looked particularly at schools within Education Investment Areas (EIAs) - announced as part of the Government's Levelling Up White Paper 2022, the third of local authorities in England where educational outcomes are currently weakest. On behalf of the Commission, Public First conducted research using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. In December 2022, it conducted a nationally representative poll of 1,004 secondary school teachers across England. This was followed by 4 focus groups with teachers and senior leaders, one focus group with early career teachers (ECTs) and a further focus group with women classroom teachers aged 25-39. Public First also facilitated 2 oral evidence sessions with experts in the school workforce, international retention data, and the policy landscape as well as a series of 6 in-depth interviews with school leaders and former school leaders.

Key points and findings

Teachers' pay and conditions

- Pay is without doubt a significant driver of teacher attrition. In a survey for the Commission of over 1,000 teachers in secondary state schools in England, 57 per cent said that increasing pay was the most important change needed to prevent teachers from leaving.
- However, the view that salary rises alone will reduce attrition is overly simplistic. Only 26 per cent of teachers polled by Public First who thought they could get more money elsewhere said they would be very likely to leave should that offer of more money in another sector come through.
- It is nearly 50 years since the Burnham Committee - sought, for the first time, to codify teachers' working hours. A new rule was introduced requiring teachers to work 1,265 hours of 'directed time' a year - i.e., time when their activities could be directed by the headteacher. The idea was to ensure that teachers would have enough 'undirected time' for marking and planning with flexibility in terms of time and location. This was all before the introduction of protected PPA time in 2002.
- However, the scope of teachers' responsibilities have evolved significantly since the 1970s, and the uncapped number of undirected hours has eroded their work-life balance. In the Public First survey, 78 per cent of teachers said that they would be likely to leave the profession if they were offered a job in another sector which promised a better work-life balance.
- Teachers across all the focus groups were prepared to acknowledge that long, unsociable working hours are not unique to their profession. But they do not have the clearer sense of reward and progression for those hours which others do. Whilst other professionals enjoy time off in lieu, paid overtime, or time-and-a-half holiday pay, the same is almost impossible within the current remuneration system for teachers.
- Many ambitious teachers putting in exceptionally long hours question the merit in doing so when they are dissatisfied by the opportunities for pay progression and career development available in classroom teaching. Promotion mainly involves taking on sustained additional responsibilities and moving further away from classroom teaching. Around half of teachers and leaders surveyed for the DfE's Working Lives of Teachers report received an additional allowance payment as part of their salary. But only 35 per cent of them agreed that the allowance fairly compensated them for the additional responsibility that comes with the role.
- Unlike in other professions, senior leaders have extremely limited flexibility to use pay to reward excellent performance and incentivise their best classroom teachers to stay. They are constrained by the salary ranges set out in the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB). The Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) programme, introduced in 1998 (and now defunct), rewarded the very best teachers - recognised through external assessment - who wished to remain in the classroom.
- The fact that leaders have limited flexibilities over pay also matters for retaining teachers in schools in EIAs. Recognition of the additional challenges faced by staff and schools in these areas could make a meaningful difference to staff retention. Overall, 72 per cent of teachers in secondary state schools said that they are helping students more with non-academic matters than they did 5 years ago; but for teachers in EIAs, this figure was as high as 82 per cent.

Achieving a work-life balance

- Teacher labour market research by the economist Jack Worth who gave evidence to the Commission, found that teachers work an average of 4.5 hours more per week than comparable graduates. Ninety-two per cent of teachers surveyed for the Commission said they worked hours outside of the school day. Seventy per cent wished they spent fewer hours doing work outside



of school hours. Some teachers pointed out that it was not simply the number of hours which was an issue, but the intensity of the work.

- However, the evidence from teachers to the Commission would suggest that the hours are not necessarily what is driving attrition rates. There are other professions with long unsociable hours which are not experiencing the same exodus.
- Although teachers' hours have not changed substantially over the past 30 years, the nature of the tasks which fill those hours has shifted away from classroom teaching.
- A large number of teachers in the poll and focus groups feel that a lot of their time is taken up with 'pointless' tasks such as data drops, or excessive marking demands. Underpinning much of this "empty work" is a deep-seated fear that to break away from these entrenched practices risks not meeting Ofsted's expectations. In schools led in this way, the external accountability system exacerbates the workload problem. It should be noted, however, that there are some school leaders who have pushed back against this.
- Another effect on teachers' conditions and workload is the additional expectations which have been placed on them, particularly since the pandemic. Seventy-four per cent of teachers stated that they often help pupils with matters beyond their academic work. Forty-one per cent reported buying key supplies such as pens, paper, or bags for them. Teachers in the focus groups spoke of the mental toll of caring for and thinking about pupils in challenging circumstances. Such tasks deviate significantly from the social contract between schools, the public and the Government, as to what might once have been conceived of the role of a teacher as an 'educator', and from the expectations of someone entering the profession who wants to be there to teach.

Challenges facing teachers

- Teachers in focus groups described a worsening of pupil behaviour since the pandemic, an apathy towards learning, and a decline in respect for teachers (often linked to figures like Andrew Tate). Sixty-four per cent of teachers in EIAs said it was an issue – or the biggest issue facing their school. Teachers in the focus groups cited an increase in apathy, disrespect, and aggression.
- Some schools have introduced creative ways in which to provide teachers with more flexible working patterns (see the full report case studies) and have moved away from the belief that teachers must be physically present on the school site for the duration of their working day. However, such practices are not widespread. Flexible working is often interpreted as part-time working. Polling for the Commission revealed that the promise of more flexible working hours in another sector would make 64 per cent of teachers likely to leave the profession.

Professional learning and school culture

- The Commission endorses the DfE's ambition of a "golden thread" of high-quality evidence underpinning support, training, and development available to teachers throughout their careers.
- The Commission heard that there are some highly successful elements of CPD which are grounded in the realities of the job.

- It also heard, however, that some elements of the content and deployment of the ECF and NPQs (National Professional Qualifications) can be too technocratic and lack applicability to the working day in a school, to teachers' subject specialisms or to their level of experience and expertise.
- The Commission heard that the content of the ECT programmes and NPQs has become overly "prescriptive" – a "sausage factory" approach. In one focus group, ECTs largely dismissed the online training exercises as part of the ECF as an irritating imposition. They were badly organised, unrelated to their subject or level of expertise.

Recommendations

- There should be a Government-commissioned, independent review of the current statutory guidance on pay and conditions for teachers in England. It should, among other things, consider the 1,265 hour rule and opportunities for teachers to progress in their careers while remaining in the classroom. It should also consider pay incentives for teachers working in EIAs.
- "Poor practice" around workload should be codified. There should be a clear list of things that schools must stop doing on the DfE website. School leaders should commit to reviewing their own workload practices on a yearly (or more regular) basis. They should be trusted to consult their teachers and individual subject departments to work out what they can scale back, given their local context, and without compromising high standards.
- In the same way that there is a target number of trainees to start postgraduate initial teacher training, estimated using the Teacher Workforce Model, so too retention should be a Key Performance Indicator of the DfE. In meeting the targets, the Department should redouble its efforts to properly consider the impact of policy changes on staff wellbeing.
- The profession needs clarity from the Government in defining what is schools' responsibility and what isn't. For example, should wraparound services for children and young people be co-located on the school site, or delivered in the community?
- There needs to be recognition at a political level that the complexity of children and young people's needs and behaviour is becoming more challenging in such a way that exceeds school and teachers' capacity to resolve alone.
- A fully-funded, specialist Human Resources advisory service should be established for schools, tasked with promoting and supporting them specifically with the implementation of best practice flexible working policies.
- The Government should commit to an urgent review of the deployment and content of the training elements of the Early Career Framework (ECF), and the content frameworks underpinning the suite of National Professional Qualifications (NPQs).
- Accountability components, including the pressure experienced by heads and teachers as a result of Ofsted inspections, should be reviewed holistically.
- Every 5 years, headteachers should be granted a month-long, paid sabbatical to complete a new qualification – 'the NPQH+' – expertly designed to develop the people management skills required of good leaders, and with a laser focus on the current context in schools.

The full documents can be downloaded from:

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/bn2bk5a3/1970s-working-conditions-in-the-2020s.pdf>