



# Keeping your early career teachers

Amid the challenges of teacher recruitment, the retention of early career teachers has become even more crucial for schools. **Matt Walker** and **Suzanne Straw** consider how the teaching profession can effectively support and retain early career teachers

It is well-documented that England is experiencing an unprecedented challenge in relation to teacher recruitment and retention.

With rising pupil numbers in secondary schools, shortfalls in the number of trainee teachers and increasing numbers of working-age teachers leaving the profession (SecEd, 2018 & 2019), doing more to retain teachers in the state sector is a crucial part of helping to address this key issue.

Recent years have seen alarming attrition rates in the profession. Of particular concern is the rate with which teachers are leaving the profession early in their careers – within the first three to five years.

Retention rates of early career teachers have dropped significantly

between 2012 and 2018 (Worth et al, 2018). The first five years are the critical years when the right development opportunities, nurture and support can make or break a teaching career.

Given the significant financial and personal commitment involved in an individual's decision to train to teach, the cost of training teachers, and the fact that new teachers are quite literally the future of the profession, this issue clearly needs addressing as a matter of urgency.

School leaders and teachers welcome the fact that the Department for Education (DfE) has made this a focus, with the Early Career Framework (ECF) offering definite steps in the right direction (DfE, 2019; SecEd, 2019).

It is notable that the retention of early career teachers is also high on the agenda at an international level, with the issue being the focus of this year's United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) World Teacher's Day in October.

## What does it take to keep early career teachers in the classroom?

In 2018, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the DfE to research the experiences of early career teachers (those teachers in their first three years of teaching).

The report, *Early career continuing professional development: Exploratory research* (Walker et al, 2018), aims to identify the factors that lead early

career teachers to feel fulfilled in their roles and therefore more likely to stay in teaching. It also looked at which factors are most likely to lead to a lack of fulfilment and the danger of them walking away.

One of the most significant findings of the research was that the translation of hopes and expectations to lived experiences at the chalkface can lead to “practice shock”, summarised by one research participant as follows: “When you go through your (initial teacher training) placements, you can't truly understand how much work there is to do, or how much responsibility comes with the job. So I think that kind of hit me hard in the NQT year.”

The reality of getting to grips with new routines, a new work/life balance and new expectations – and feeling like a “beginner” all over again, regardless of previous achievements – can come as a surprise.

“ The ECF is being rolled out in selected pilot areas from September 2020, and nationally from September 2021. However, the framework is available now, and we would recommend that schools familiarise themselves with the detail and consider what the implementation and workload considerations might be ”

And unless these issues are addressed, there is a high risk of new teachers walking away from the profession well before they might have anticipated doing so. Therefore, support from colleagues to help them settle into their new roles, and to acclimatise to the school environment is of key importance.

Our report found that areas in which teachers in their first year in the classroom feel they need most training include behaviour management, assessment, pedagogy, and supporting students with particular needs.

During this first year, positive factors in supporting the development of new teachers include the presence of:

- A supportive mentor, who is ideally a subject specialist and respected by the mentee as a practitioner in the classroom.
- A balanced package of support, typically involving a standardised training programme alongside more personalised, teacher-led opportunities.
- A supportive school culture.

In the second year, the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all model of CPD becomes clear in this report. Many teachers reported wanting more “light touch” support that allowed them the time and space to “hone their craft”, while others were keen to begin to pursue opportunities for progression into middle leadership and specialist roles.

In this second year in the classroom, our research suggested that the levels of support offered by senior staff or mentors varies in terms of regularity and formality of contact.

Positive experiences reported by teachers in their second or third year broadly chimed with those in their first year, with an emphasis on the need for bespoke training and support and, once again, the benefits of a supportive whole-school development culture.

Emotional support was cited as something needed by early career teachers but which was not always effectively addressed. In addition, several early career teachers highlighted that they would value more dedicated time to reflect on their training and development.

## Moving forward

The introduction of the ECF has been broadly welcomed by the teaching profession and appears to address many of the issues highlighted by early career teachers.

The introduction of dedicated training materials and fully funded mentor training, with time for this taken into account, is a positive step forward.

Providing sufficient training and development for early career teachers is vital in helping to address the issue of the practice shock that new teachers can experience as they enter the classroom.

It is also encouraging to see that the development of the ECF has been evidence-based, with direct involvement of credible and experienced educational professionals. It certainly feels as if the government is engaging directly with teachers in a pragmatic move to address the teacher recruitment and retention challenge.

The ECF is being rolled out in selected pilot areas from September 2020, and nationally from September 2021. However, the framework is available now, and we would recommend that schools familiarise themselves with the detail and consider what the implementation and workload considerations might be for their particular environment.

*Matt Walker is a research manager and Suzanne Straw is a research director at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).*

## Further information & research

► *Early career continuing professional development (CPD): Exploratory research*, Walker, Straw, Worth & Grayson, NFER, November 2018: [www.nfer.ac.uk/early-career-continuing-professional-development-cpd-exploratory-research/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/early-career-continuing-professional-development-cpd-exploratory-research/)

► *Supporting early career teachers (ECF)*, DfE, January 2019: <http://bit.ly/2UpPaUL>

► *Two-year support package to boost retention of new teachers*, SecEd, January 2019: <http://bit.ly/2He5ofc>

► *Key subjects missing hundreds of teachers as crisis continues*, SecEd, December 2018: <http://bit.ly/2Ht8NIQ>

► *Teacher workforce dynamics in England*, Worth, Lynch, Hillary, Rennie & Andrade, NFER, October 2018: [www.nfer.ac.uk/teacher-workforce-dynamics-in-england](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/teacher-workforce-dynamics-in-england)

► *Teacher recruitment and retention strategy*, DfE, January 2019: <http://bit.ly/2Tphgiw>

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# Flexible and part-time working in practice

Rising pupil numbers mean that England's schools need more teachers each year, especially in secondary schools where pupil numbers are forecast to rise by 15 per cent over the next decade. **Caroline Sharp** looks at how increasing part-time and flexible working opportunities could help keep teachers in the profession – and in your school...

**H**ow many teachers in your school work part-time? If it is around 22 per cent, then that is average for secondary schools in England. Now think of your staff profile – do you have many teachers in their 30s and 50s? If so, you might expect more part-time working.

But would you welcome a request for reduced hours as an opportunity to hold onto valuable teachers. Or would you see it as a complication that you could do without?

As we said in a previous Research Insights article for *SecEd* (2019), part-time working is less common in secondary than primary schools – and the evidence suggests that a lack of part-time work drives some teachers to leave and is a barrier to enabling some ex-teachers to return.

We have recently been researching the views and experiences of teachers and school leaders in relation to part-time and flexible working. Our report (NFER, 2019) finds that, excluding those who said they would ideally like to reduce their hours but cannot afford to work part-time, 36 per cent of secondary teachers and leaders would ideally like to work part-time compared to the 19 per cent who currently do so.

Accordingly, the report estimates that around one in six secondary school teachers would like to reduce their hours, and around one in 12 would like to reduce their hours by more than a day a week.

We think this is an over-estimate of the actual demand, because it is highly unlikely that all of these teachers would actually reduce their hours if given the opportunity. But it does suggest that there is a considerable number of

teachers who would like to work part-time but are currently working full-time.

So what is preventing these teachers from reducing their working hours? Just under a third of the teachers who wanted to work fewer hours and could afford to do so, said that they had not made a formal request for part-time working because they suspected their senior leaders would not allow them to change. One in 10 said that they were concerned about the potential impact on their promotion prospects.

However, only 14 per cent reported that they have had a request for part-time working rejected. This suggests that the perception that school leaders would not support a request for part-time working is a greater deterrent than teachers' actual experience of having a request turned down.

## What are the barriers and benefits for schools?

According to the leaders we interviewed, their main concerns about part-time and flexible working were to ensure continuity for pupils and fit the available staff hours into the timetabling "jigsaw". They were worried about communication issues and the additional costs involved in employing more teachers and paying for handover time.

On the positive side, the key benefits of enabling part-time and flexible working include: increased teacher retention, improved staff wellbeing, retaining specialist expertise and a broad curriculum offer, and – where full-time staff are underutilised – an opportunity to reduce costs.

“ Schools with high levels of part-time working tended to use a two-week timetable, and to schedule their part-timers first. They made up for the reduction in hours in a variety of ways, including asking part-time staff to increase their hours, using trusted supply teachers, approaching recent retirees, or sharing teachers with other schools ”

## Why proactive leadership is crucial

Our research found that proactive school leadership is a key characteristic of schools with high proportions of part-time staff.

This can include being systematic about asking for annual submissions to change working patterns well in advance of the new school year, checking these with timetables and staffing forecasts, and then negotiating further with staff – who also need to be flexible when discussing their requests.

Schools with high levels of part-time working tended to use a two-week timetable, and to schedule their part-timers first. They made up for the reduction in hours in a variety of ways, including asking part-time staff to increase their hours, using trusted supply teachers, approaching recent retirees, or sharing teachers with other schools. School leaders also ensured that there were strong communication systems in place so that part-time staff can have easy access to all the information they need.

The report adds: "School leaders attempted to ensure continuity for pupils by minimising the number of subject teachers and form tutors working with each group. Some schools had arranged for teachers to share the role of form tutor, and had increased flexibility by separating registration from pastoral sessions."

## Can leaders work part-time?

Some of our interviewees were adamant that part-time working was incompatible with a middle or senior leadership role. For example, one told us: "I make it crystal clear that if they want to go part-time, they will be stepping down from their responsibility area."

Others said that it worked well in their schools. Several interviewees explained that leaders working part-time delegated some of their responsibilities to a less experienced member of staff, which had the added benefit of preparing these teachers to take on middle and senior leadership roles.

One school had reviewed all leadership responsibilities, asking themselves: "Why does this member of staff need to be here?" They concluded that not all senior staff had to be on site at all times and this enabled some members of the senior leadership team to work part-time.

## What about other kinds of flexible working?

Our research found few examples of flexible working patterns for teachers (such as staggered or compressed hours, or allowing staff to work from home). This is despite the potential demand for it from teachers – for example, to enable them to drop off and collect their own children from school.

Teaching requires teachers to be present in the classroom and the typical school day allows few opportunities for flexibility. Our interviewees referred to other requirements for teachers to be on site, such as form tutor periods, departmental planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) sessions, whole-staff meetings and training.

It seems that enabling more flexible, as opposed to part-time, working patterns requires further consideration. However, having said that, a recent *SecEd* case study provides an example of how one school allocated blocks of time on the timetable to each faculty area which enabled more flexible working patterns (*SecEd*, 2018).

## Where next?

School leaders with high proportions of teachers working part-time had

typically identified the barriers and sought solutions wherever possible. This included planning and negotiating teachers' working patterns to suit both the needs of individuals and the needs of the school.

They also strengthened their communication systems and found alternatives to traditional ways of managing non-teaching responsibilities including PPA and pastoral care.

Given the growing teacher supply challenge and the fact that there is currently a large group of teachers in their mid-30s (when part-time employment peaks), school leaders need to consider how to make flexible and part-time working part of their schools. Not doing so risks emulating King Canute, trying forlornly to hold back the tide. Better to welcome the challenge, see it as an opportunity, and to reap the benefits. **SecEd**

*Caroline Sharp is a research director at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). She tweets as @Caroline\_Sharp1*

## Further information & research

- ▶ To download NFER's report *Part-time Teaching and Flexible Working in Secondary Schools* (June 2019) visit <http://bit.ly/2ZH9ovV>
- ▶ For more on NFER's work in the School Workforce area, visit [www.nfer.ac.uk/research/school-workforce](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/school-workforce)
- ▶ *Part-time working: Making it work*, *SecEd* and NFER, Research Insights January 2019: <http://bit.ly/2H1awWE>
- ▶ *Flexible working: A case study*, *SecEd*, November 2018: <http://bit.ly/2PYylgr>

## Research Insights from NFER & SecEd

- ▶ This article is part of *SecEd*'s regular NFER Research Insights series, which offers practical advice for schools based on the latest research findings. A free pdf of the latest Research Insights best practice and advisory articles and an archive of past content can be found in the Knowledge Bank section of the *SecEd* website: [www.sec-ed.co.uk/knowledge-bank/](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/knowledge-bank/)

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# Progress 8: Is it time to tinker?

There has been some debate about the inherent unfairness of Progress 8 towards schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged and SEN pupils. **Dr Lesley Duff** looks at the evidence...



One of the biggest changes made to the accountability system in recent years was the introduction of Progress 8 in 2015/16 as the principle headline performance measure for all secondary schools in England (secondary schools were given the opportunity to opt into the new accountability measures in 2014/15, although only about 10 per cent did).

This marked an important shift by Department for Education (DfE) ministers away from using a threshold measure as the main way of judging secondary school performance to using a value-added measure.

This was an important development because, as readers of this article will know, prior attainment is a key factor in explaining how well children do at the end of school.

Indeed, Education Endowment Foundation analysis (2013) shows that a pre-test score (key stage 2) explains around half of the variation in GCSE scores (depending on the subject).

Prior to the introduction of Progress 8, the headline threshold measure in use was the proportion of pupils in a school achieving five or more A\* to C grade passes, including English and maths.

There had been several concerns about using a threshold measure to hold schools to account. As well as not taking account of pupils' prior attainment, there were fears that some schools were focusing disproportionate effort and resource on pupils on the C/D grade borderline.

NFER's own research (2018) into accountability systems in different countries highlights the way in which threshold measures can distort school behaviour, encouraging them to focus on children just below the threshold, at the expense of those expected to perform comfortably above or well below the threshold.

Progress 8 was designed to address these concerns. The DfE also said it would encourage schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, with a focus on an academic core at key stage 4, to focus on all of their pupils – as every increase in a grade will count towards their score – and to measure performance across a broader curriculum of eight qualifications.

## Should Progress 8 also take account of other factors?

Many commentators agree that Progress 8 has been an improvement compared to the previous threshold measure as it takes account of, or "controls" for, prior attainment.

However, does it go far enough? There are some concerns that Progress 8 does not take account of differences in pupil demographics and socio-economic factors, which can vary substantially as Figure 1 (below) shows.

Why should this matter to schools? Research shows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve around half a grade lower in each subject

compared to non-disadvantaged pupils with similar prior attainment.

Furthermore, disadvantaged pupils outperform their more advantaged peers on average in only six per cent of state secondary schools, which has not really changed since the introduction of Progress 8, despite the DfE's official statistics for key stage 4 2018 (published January 2019) suggesting that the disadvantage gap is narrowing.

This has a disproportionate effect on schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils on their rolls. Recently published research by Leckie and Goldstein (2018) suggests that more than a third of "underperforming" secondary schools would no longer fall into the category if progress measures were reweighted to account for pupils' backgrounds.

A school having a low progress outcome that is reported in the public domain can potentially have other significant ramifications. For example, the school may be more likely to be inspected by Ofsted, which may pass an unfavourable judgement, or they may have difficulty in attracting and retaining new teachers and/or pupils.

## An alternative viewpoint

There are therefore some strong arguments for refining Progress 8 to take account of differences in pupil demographics and socio-economic factors, but there is also a counter perspective to this.

One of the objectives of this and previous governments is to achieve higher levels of social mobility. The education system is one of the key levers that the government has to take forward this objective. Ministers want to ensure that the right incentives are in place to encourage schools to close the attainment gaps that exist between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils, between pupils with SEN and those without, between boys and girls, between different ethnic groups, and so on.

If the DfE was to change the Progress 8 measure to control for demographic and socio-economic factors this could arguably weaken these incentives for schools to help their pupils achieve their full potential.

## So what is the answer?

There is no perfect answer, but most people agree that Progress 8 is much better than the threshold measure used previously, as taking account of prior attainment

tough on schools with less affluent intakes not to take these factors into account in some way – and perhaps does not stretch "higher" performing schools in affluent areas sufficiently.

Various solutions have been proposed, including developing an adjusted Progress 8 measure that takes account of demographic and socio-economic characteristics or the proposal from the National Association of Head Teachers (September 2018) to only compare Progress 8 scores across school groups with similar pupil intakes to one another.

NFER believes that this is the time to take a fresh look at this to see whether Progress 8 can be refined so that all schools feel they are being more fairly judged in future.

• *Dr Lesley Duff is director of research at the National Foundation for Educational Research*

## Further information

- *Pre-testing in EEF evaluations*, Education Endowment Foundation, October 2013: <http://bit.ly/2TvjiBk>
- *What impact does accountability have on curriculum, standards and engagement in education?* Brill, Grayson, Kuhn & O'Donnell, NFER, September 2018: <http://bit.ly/2LcdupK>
- *Analysis: The introduction of Progress 8*, Education Policy Institute, March 2017: <http://bit.ly/2TvjiBk>
- *Should we adjust for pupil background in school value-added models? A study of Progress 8 and school accountability in England*, Leckie & Goldstein, University of Bristol School of Education, November 2018: <http://bit.ly/2NKwRHt>
- *Assessing the variance in pupil attainment: How important is the school attended?* IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Wilkinson, Bryson & Stokes, February 2018: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11372.pdf>
- *Improving school accountability*, National Association of Head Teachers, September 2018: <http://bit.ly/2yapeng>

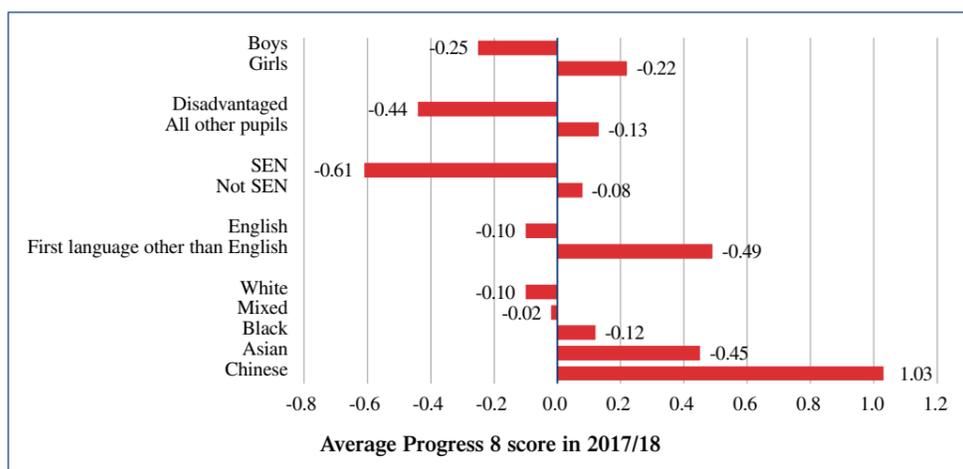


Figure 1: Progress 8 scores can vary markedly by pupil characteristics

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# Part-time working: Making it work

Part-time and flexible working could become a vital tool if we want to retain secondary teachers in the profession in the coming years. **Jens Van den Brande** looks at the evidence

**E**nsuring there are enough high-quality teachers in the sector is crucial for delivering a first-class education for young people. However, as the number of secondary pupils is forecast to increase by 19 per cent over the next decade, attracting and retaining enough secondary teachers is a key challenge facing school leaders today.

A recent report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) looking at teacher retention highlights that increasing part-time and flexible working opportunities for teachers is likely to encourage more teachers to stay in the profession (*Teacher workforce dynamics in England*, October 2018).

The prospect of large numbers of full-time teachers moving to part-time can on its own present a risk to teacher supply – for example, a *Guardian* article last year suggested that if 40 per cent of teachers go down to four days a week, we would need another 40,000 extra people to replace them. However, our research evidence leads us to think there are important reasons to be more positive about the overall effects of more part-time working.

So, why is it imperative for secondary schools to take proactive action to become more flexible employers?

## An unmet demand

There is unmet demand for part-time working in the secondary sector, which drives some teachers to leave.

Our research has shown that many secondary teachers who leave teaching for another job, switch from full-time to part-time work. Among secondary teachers who leave for another job, the proportion working part-time rises by 20 percentage points after leaving, which suggests that this unmet demand for part-time work is partly driving some secondary teachers to leave the profession. It also suggests that more flexible working opportunities could have encouraged some of them to stay.

## A sustainable option

Part-time working needs to be a more sustainable option for teachers. We found that the difference in leaving rates between part-time and full-time teachers is greater in secondary schools than in primary schools. This may indicate that part-time teachers in secondary schools find it more difficult to sustain the demands of part-time working alongside their other responsibilities.

Improving the retention of part-time teachers would help to ensure that success in accommodating more part-time working for those who want it leads to sustained retention in the profession.

## Inflexible schools?

A lack of flexibility is a barrier to potential returners. The relative inflexibility of secondary schools is not only having a negative impact on leaving rates, but it is also creating a barrier to re-entry for secondary teachers who wish to return to teaching – for example, former teachers who left the profession to raise a family and are now ready to return as their children are a little older.

Our recent evaluation of the Return to Teaching pilot (June 2018) identified a lack of part-time and flexible working opportunities as one of the main barriers facing secondary teachers who want to return to the profession.

This barrier was particularly cited by career-breakers, a group of potential returners who otherwise would have the greatest potential to make a successful return with minimal support.

## So, what can we do?

This all begs the question: what can secondary schools do to become more flexible employers?

In the March 2018 Teacher Voice Omnibus, school leaders said that the complexity of secondary school timetabling is the main reason why part-time teaching is more difficult to accommodate.

Timetabling issues, along with attitudes and cultures in some schools, mean that flexible opportunities are not as widespread as some teachers would hope.

However, our analysis of the latest teacher workforce data (DfE, June 2018) shows that almost a quarter of secondary schools have a proportion of part-time teachers that is more than 30 per cent, well above the average of about 19 per cent. These are likely to be schools that the sector can learn most from in terms of accommodat-



ing part-time working for their staff and there is probably one of these secondary schools near you (which you can check using the information in a downloadable spreadsheet – see further information).

Therefore, if you're a school leader who wants to improve the working arrangements in your school, why not explore how other schools have managed to overcome barriers to flexible working, such as timetabling, cost and promoting a culture that encourages flexible working. Sharing best practice in overcoming the barriers to providing flexible working opportunities can go a long way to improving teacher retention issues in the secondary sector in the long-term.

While we would encourage school leaders to proactively find ways of accommodating greater flexibility for staff, teachers who would like to work part-time also do need to respect the challenge that school leaders face in ensuring the school is fully staffed at all times.

**“The secondary teacher workforce has a large group of teachers approaching their mid-30s, which is when part-time employment peaks”**

Not all part-time teachers can work a four-day week with Fridays off. Teachers being flexible on what arrangements they are willing to accept would make the task of senior leaders who are open to accommodating flexible arrangements much easier.

But it is quite possible that some of the unmet demand for part-time work isn't actually about wanting to work part-time at all. Perhaps it is much more about how manageable a full-time job as a secondary school teacher currently is.

Teachers work just over 50 hours per week on average during term-time, considerably more hours than nurses and police officers work in a normal working week. School leaders need to bear in mind that teachers' requests to work part-time and flexibly might be a symptom of an unmanageable workload in term-time. Secondary schools should use line management effectively to identify workload issues and intervene to increase support and reduce workload pressures where issues are identified.

The secondary teacher workforce has a large group of teachers approaching their mid-30s, which is when part-time employment peaks. It's also when teaching roles tend to come with more responsibilities and the demands of family life are at their height for many teachers.

This means that the next few years are a critical time for taking action to make the job of a full-time secondary teacher more sustainable and to provide opportunities for more flexible approaches to accommodate the growing demand for part-time working.

• Jens Van den Brande is an economist at the National

Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). You can follow him on Twitter @jens\_brande

## Information & references

- The school workforce is one of eight key topic areas for NFER. For more information and to read its research in this area, visit [www.nfer.ac.uk/key-topics-expertise/school-workforce/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/key-topics-expertise/school-workforce/)
- To download NFER's latest report – *Teacher workforce dynamics in England*, October 2018 – visit [www.nfer.ac.uk/teacher-workforce-dynamics-in-england/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/teacher-workforce-dynamics-in-england/)
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- *Flexible working sounds lovely, but it would make the teacher shortage worse*, *Guardian*, February 2018: <http://bit.ly/2US9Zcr>
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- *School workforce in England: November 2017*, Department for Education, June 2018: <http://bit.ly/2KwCJVv>
- To download the NFER's spreadsheet of schools with high proportions of part-time staff, go to <https://tinyurl.com/y7kgqlfa>
- See also, *Flexible working: A case study*, *SecEd*, November 2018: <http://bit.ly/2SWbYuf>



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# The growing pupil population...

There is a growing demand for secondary school places in England. **Zoe Claymore** explores what the data tells us and the possible implications for schools and teachers



**W**ith rapidly rising pupil numbers, a current shortage of places in one-fifth of local authorities and high parental expectations, secondary school admissions are arguably about to come under even more of a spotlight than usual.

### Demand has already risen

Nationally, pupil numbers in state secondary schools have risen by 69,000 since January 2013 and now stand at nearly 2.85 million (as of January 2018), the highest level since the start of the decade. Secondary school applications also rose by 83,000 between 2013 and 2018, a rise of 17 per cent.

School applications data also shows that 96 per cent of local authorities had more applications in 2018 than they had five years previously. However, although most of the local authorities in England have seen some growth over this period, as Figure 1 shows, growth rates differed significantly by region.

### Too few places to meet demand

Some local authorities may already be feeling the impact of this rapidly rising demand. In January 2018, 29 local authorities, nearly one in five, received more secondary school applications from families who live in their borders than there were places available.

This is a sharp increase from January 2014, when only 17 local authorities had more secondary school applications than places.

The excess demand in these oversubscribed local authorities is also getting worse. In 2014, the 17 oversubscribed local authorities received 191 more applications on average than they had spaces available. However, in 2018, the 29 oversubscribed local authorities received an average of 234 more applications than places available.

The shortage of places is most acute in urban areas. In 2018, 27 of the 29 local authorities that were short on places were cities such as Birmingham, Nottingham and Bristol, and London boroughs – particularly outer London boroughs such as Greenwich, Ealing and Croydon.

In contrast, areas with a large surplus of places appear to be largely rural. In 2018, there were 14 local authorities which had more than 1,000 surplus places, which were largely rural counties such as North Yorkshire, Norfolk and Cumbria. These large surpluses in some areas appear to suggest problems with place planning at a regional

or national level. A surplus of this magnitude could indicate that some rural schools are struggling to remain viable, and difficult decisions may be required to ensure school places are located in the areas where they are needed.

### Rising competition?

There has also been a steady increase in the proportion of families not getting a place at their most preferred school or a place in any one of their top three preferences.

Figure 2 shows the gradual increase in the percentage of families whose school preferences are not being met. As before there are big regional variations, with London worst affected. One in three families in London did not get their top preference in 2018, while about one in eight did not get any of their top three preferences.

### The number of appeals is rising

Over the last three years the number of families who have had an appeal heard about their secondary school allocation has also risen slightly. In 2015/16, the proportion of parents appealing secondary school allocations was 3.6 per cent, which rose to 4.1 per cent in 2017/18.

While part of this may be due to the rising secondary pupil numbers since 2015/16, it may also be an outcome of growing tensions caused by greater competition for places and falling percentages of families being allocated a place in any of their top preferred schools.

### Demand set to rise further

The supply and demand trends, along with a reduction in parental preferences being met, are particularly worrying as the Department for Education's (DfE) own projections indicate that there will be an extra 376,000 pupils in the secondary school system by January 2023 compared to 2018 levels (see figure 3).

This is largely due to the increase in the live birth rate in England from around the early to late-2000s. Overall, secondary pupil numbers in January 2023 will be 16 per cent higher than 10 years earlier.

### What can local authorities do?

As local authorities know how many children they have in their primary schools, it should be possible

for them to accurately predict the number of places needed at secondary level in any given year well in advance and take action to create sufficient pupil places. Many local authorities will have already started to make plans to meet this growing demand for places, although knowing about the growing demand and having the ability to implement changes at sufficient speed can be a challenge.

There are several ways that the available secondary capacity in a local authority may be increased, each of which will have an impact on school leaders. A new free school could be opened, which depending on its size could bolster capacity significantly, albeit not for a few years as there are considerable steps to work through, from navigating the complex planning process and finding a suitable site to hiring sufficient numbers of new staff. While a new school adds capacity, it also increases competition to attract pupils, which may be an issue for any local schools which are judged by Ofsted to be underperforming.

Another lever that local authorities may seek to use, which can be quicker to implement, is to work with school and academy leaders to expand an existing school. Local authority schools or academies may agree to take on a bulge class for one or more years, or to increase the number of form classes in the school, or expand existing classes. The local authority will work with school leaders in their planning area to explore whether they have scope to expand to help meet this extra demand or whether they can take on extra pupils within their existing structures, all of which brings extra challenges.

National data suggests that increasing secondary class sizes may already be happening as they average 1.1 pupils more than they did in 2013/14. Figure 4 shows that the number of classes with more than 30

pupils has also risen by 2.1 percentage points since 2013/14.

### What does this mean for schools?

With secondary school places in England projected to continue to increase, and at an even faster rate than seen in the previous half decade, this could have a big impact on secondary schools. Without a considerable increase in places available in key areas, there could be yet more local authorities that do not have enough spaces to meet demand. This may lead to a rising number of families not receiving a place at one of their top preferred schools, increasing tension with parents and the unhappiness of pupils, who have to attend a secondary school they did not want.

There are also significant potential consequences for school leaders and teachers. School leaders may have to deal with more issues around reduced pupil engagement, more requests from parents seeking to move their child to/away from their school, and greater pupil mobility.

Teachers may be increasingly likely to teach in crowded schools or teach larger classes. Extra pupils, even if they can be accommodated in temporary classrooms, may put pressure on all school services, such as dining halls, sport facilities and pastoral care provision. These factors could have negative consequences for staff recruitment and retention, which may already be a problem area for the school.

So brace yourselves, as the next few years look likely to be challenging. It is important that the DfE looks urgently at how they can support local authorities and schools in areas where there are not enough school places to meet demand.

*Zoe Claymore is a researcher at the National Foundation for Educational Research.*

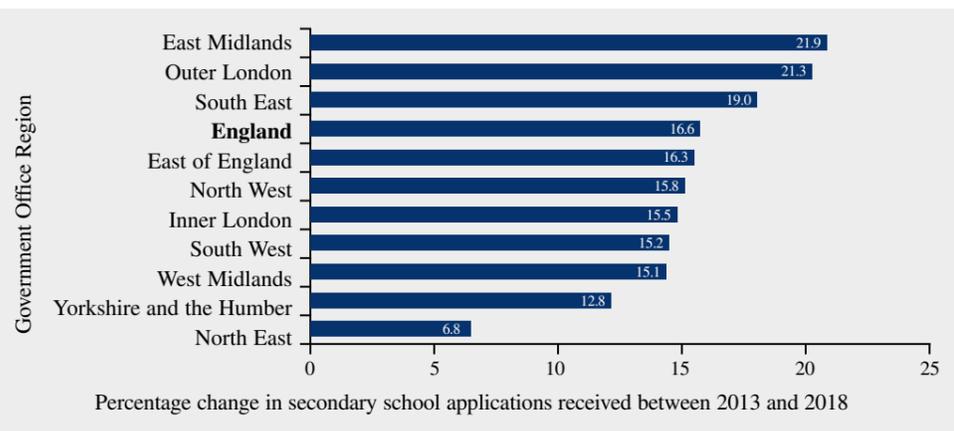


Figure 1: Pupil numbers have risen in all regions, with some having larger increases than others

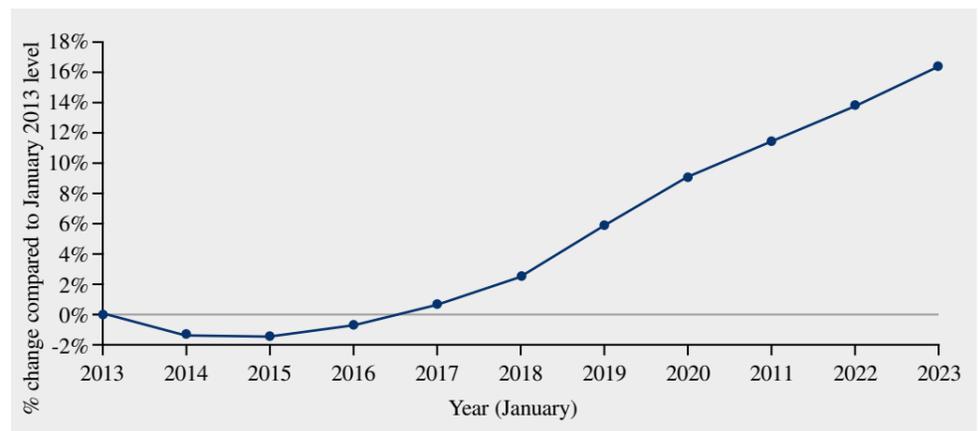


Figure 3: Pupil numbers in state secondary schools are projected to continue to rise

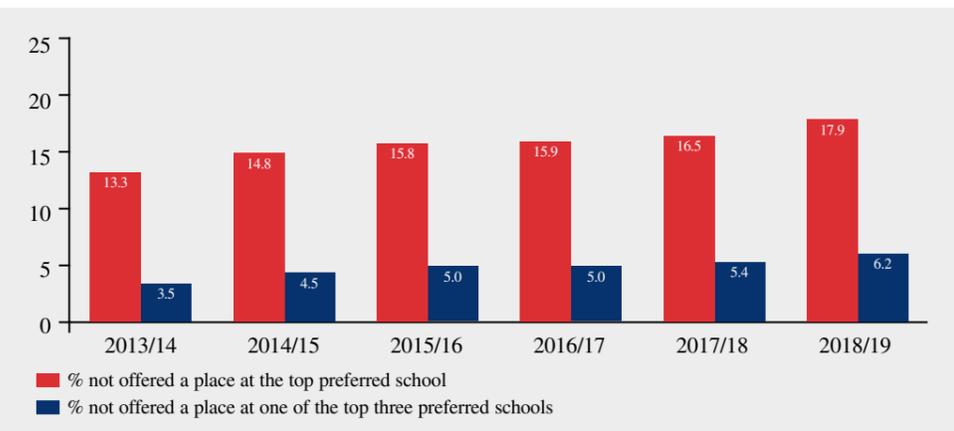


Figure 2: More pupils are not being allocated a place at their preferred secondary schools

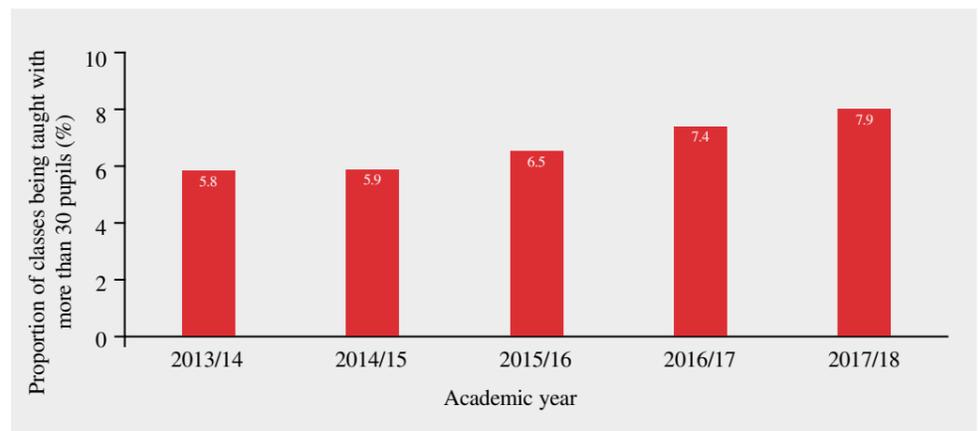


Figure 4: The proportion of classroom teachers teaching large classes is rising



# Are free schools achieving their aims?

The free school programme is a flagship policy of the Conservative government, but eight years on has it achieved its stated policy aims? **Jennifer Garry** reports on new research into the free school project

**R**ecent research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Sutton Trust found that pupils at secondary free schools perform slightly better compared to similar pupils at other schools.

Although it is still early days for free schools, these initial findings suggest that secondary free schools are doing well in terms of improving pupil performance. However, are they meeting all of their original policy aims?

Free schools were first introduced in 2010 as one of the coalition government's flagship education policies. The free school programme aimed to bring new and innovative providers, including parents, into a more autonomous and self-improving school system, driving up standards through greater innovation and school choice.

Today there are 113 secondary free schools in England and a further 37 which are all-through free schools. These numbers are expected to continue to rise, with more already in the pipeline.

During the 2017 General Election campaign, the Conservatives also pledged to open 100 free schools in each year of the current Parliament. More recently in May 2018, the government announced that they were looking to open new mainstream free schools in areas that currently have the lowest standards and have a need for additional school places.

As free schools are expected to remain a key part of the government's education policy in England, we looked at the data to consider whether the existing secondary free schools are having a positive impact on the education system and successfully achieving their original policy aims.

## Encouraging parental involvement

One of the original intentions of the free schools programme was to encourage groups of parents to set up schools in their communities.

However, our research found that only one in five secondary free schools opened to date has had parents involved in their inception.

The number of schools with parental involvement was higher in the early years of the programme, with parents involved in the set-up of more than

40 per cent of secondary free schools opened between 2011 and 2013. However, since 2015, this figure has dropped to less than 20 per cent.

## Innovation

Another aim of the free school programme was to increase the number of schools with innovative approaches to their curriculum or ethos. As part of this research, we explored how many secondary free schools opened to date demonstrate such an approach.

We did this by reviewing school prospectuses, websites and other publicly available documentation to identify which free schools demonstrated an innovative concept which was central to their identity and ethos, and widely embedded in the curriculum or school activities. These we classified as innovators.

After carefully reviewing all the secondary free schools, we found that we had classified less than one-third of those opened to date as innovators.

## New academy free schools

Since the inception of the free schools programme, many of the new secondary free schools that have opened have had a multi-academy trust (MAT) involved in their creation.

Around half of the secondary free schools set-up between 2011 and 2015 were opened by a MAT. However, this jumped to over three-quarters of secondary free schools opened since 2015. Such schools are less likely to have parent involvement. Nor are they likely to be innovative – our research finds that only 18 per cent of secondary free schools set up by MATs are innovator schools compared with 46 per cent of the non-trust led schools.

It appears that the free school programme has primarily become a vehicle by which new schools are opened by academy chains to increase capacity.

## Building capacity

One of the long-standing debates that has been taking place since the free schools programme was introduced is whether they are being set up in the areas where there is a need for more school places.

The report finds that secondary free schools

have largely been set up in such areas (See figure 1, below).

While this additional capacity is welcomed, the Department for Education's (DfE) own forecasts show that an extra half a million secondary school places will be needed in the next 10 years. There is therefore, still much to do to expand capacity to meet this rising demand for places.

## Improving school performance

Initial signs are that secondary free schools are taking positive steps towards raising pupil performance. We find that pupils in secondary free schools perform slightly better at key stage 4 than pupils with similar characteristics in other mainstream secondary schools. Furthermore, disadvantaged pupils in secondary free schools outperform their peers in other school types by the equivalent of one grade higher in three subjects.

Initial results at key stage 4 are promising but, they are still currently based on a relatively small number of pupils. As time goes on, it will be interesting to observe whether this positive trend in the key stage 4 performance of free schools continues.

## What should the role of free schools be in future?

Our research indicates that secondary free schools may not be as unique and innovative as was initially intended.

Instead, the programme is increasingly reflecting the fact that it is the only vehicle for new schools at a time of rising rolls.

As free schools are a continuing area of investment for the government, greater clarity about their purpose would be helpful, and would allow a more full evaluation of whether they are delivering their policy objectives and are value for the investment made.

*Jennifer Garry is a researcher at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and co-authored the Free For All? report.*

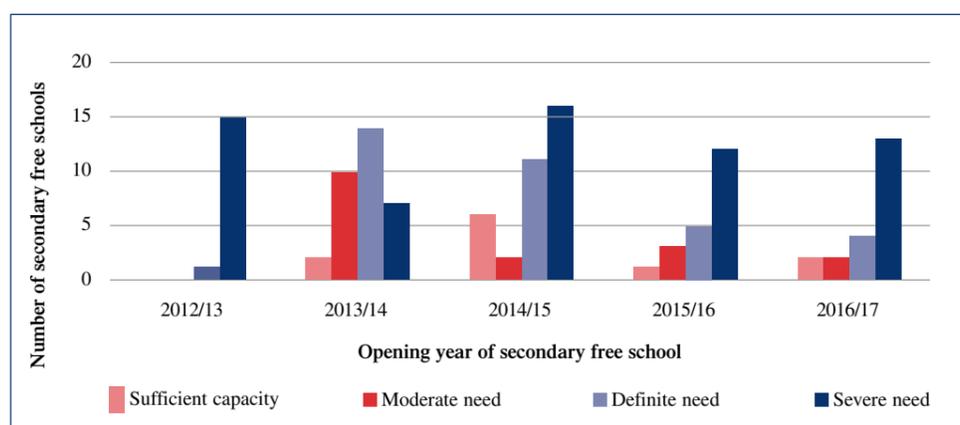


Figure 1: Most secondary free schools have been set up in areas with a severe basic need

**As free schools are a continuing area of investment for the government, greater clarity about their purpose would be helpful, and would allow a more full evaluation of whether they are delivering**

## Summary: Free For All?

The research – *Free For All? Analysing free schools in England, 2018* – was published by NFER and the Sutton Trust in May 2018. It combines secondary data analysis using multiple government datasets and systematic searching to create a typology of free schools in England. Headline findings include:

- Free schools are not fulfilling their original purpose. Only one-third of free schools set up to date were found to demonstrate a novel approach, while only one in five have had parents involved in their inception. In contrast, the number of free schools which have had MATs involved in their inception has increased. Overall, 178 free schools have been set up by MATs (nearly 60 per cent).
- Free schools have largely been set up in areas with a need for more school places. Almost all secondary free schools have opened in areas which had insufficient available capacity. Conversely, a number of the earliest primary free schools were opened in areas that had enough capacity. Since 2013/14, most primary free schools have been opened in areas with at least some need.
- Secondary free school pupils achieve slightly better attainment outcomes. At key stage 4 in 2016/17, they performed slightly better than pupils with similar characteristics at other types of school. Disadvantaged pupils in free schools performed the equivalent of a quarter of a grade higher in each subject compared to their peers with similar characteristics.

The full report by Jen Garry, Chloe Rush, Jude Hillary, Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute is free to download via [www.nfer.ac.uk/free-for-all-analysing-free-schools-in-england-2018/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/free-for-all-analysing-free-schools-in-england-2018/)