

Britain: Start of new term sees education system near collapse

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The start of the new school year in England and Wales saw tens of thousands of children return to school with no teacher to teach them and an education system on the brink of collapse.

Reports from education authorities and teaching agencies revealed that there is a shortage of up to 5,000 teachers needed to fill existing posts.

A poll published by the *Times Education Supplement* and the Secondary Heads Association found that heads were unhappy with 1,372 of the 7,127 appointments they had made. If typical, it would mean that 6,000 of the 30,000 appointments in England and Wales were unsatisfactory.

Many schools have had to appoint people who were unqualified, teaching a subject not their own, or overseas recruits not familiar with the curriculum. The crisis is more pronounced in particular subject areas, with 45 percent of those teaching Maths to 11-14 year-olds teaching outside their main subject area.

At one southeast comprehensive, the head took on two teachers who “walked in off the street with no qualifications”, the survey found. A head from a northwest comprehensive said: “We are appointing staff who, in a perfect world, we would not touch with a barge pole.”

The recruitment and retention crisis within the teaching profession is one of the worst in any industry and profession. The impact of decades of gutting education budgets, increased workloads and stress has resulted in what can only be described as an exodus from the profession. Government statistics showed that 40 percent of teachers are leaving the profession within the first three years. In a poll for the *Guardian* newspaper, over half of the serving teachers asked said they will leave within the next 10 years. In order for the education system to be sustainable, one in every eight

university graduates would need to be recruited to teaching.

Mike Tomlinson, the New Chief Inspector of Schools, admitted in an interview to the *Guardian* that the pay and conditions of teachers made it impossible for teachers, in areas such as London to live in the city. The starting salary of a teacher is less than £18,000, while the average cost of a home nationally is over £125,000 and is often far in excess of this in London. A working couple would need to be earning over £40,000 to qualify for an adequate mortgage.

A government commissioned review into teacher’s pay and conditions this year showed that the relentless thrust of centrally imposed requirements, regulations and initiatives, which have eroded professional self-esteem and job satisfaction were the most important factors cited by those that had left the job. The review, produced by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, found that in 1994 primary and secondary school classroom teachers worked around 49 hours a week. Primary teachers now work an extra three hours on average, 52 hours a week, while secondary teachers work 50.5 hours a week.

A survey of 400 teachers by the website justforteachers.co.uk presents more shocking figures still. Teachers spent an average of 45 hours in the classroom, but also spent an additional 19 hours a week in preparing lessons. Of those surveyed, 42 percent felt their job had led them to suffer from depression and 63 percent said they suffered from insomnia. Nearly all said their family life suffered because of long working hours.

A study by Howard Gennister, Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, found that education spending under Labour fell to a lower level than under the previous Conservative government and has barely recovered. Labour had

squeezed spending on Britain's schools and universities in its first term to the lowest share of national income since the early 1960s. Spending on education fell to just 4.5 percent of GDP in 1998 and 1999.

The government has sought to counter criticisms of its performance by pointing to the supposedly "rising standards" revealed in the latest exam results. Here too, Labour has been rebuffed by one of the country's leading examiners, who claimed that the pass rates in the latest GCSE results were fixed.

Jeffrey Robinson, principal examiner with the second biggest exam board OCR, provided detailed evidence of how GCSE exams have been "dumbed down" to provide the government with the pass rates it desires. Twelve years ago a 15-year-old had to get a mark of 65 percent to get a grade C in the intermediate level paper in GCSE maths. This year, a C could be earned with just 45 percent. In the higher level paper, just 18 percent was needed to get a C grade.

The government argued that the change in the pass mark was related to changes in the structure of the exam paper itself, but leading academics countered that the changes to the exam showed a narrowing of focus so that pupils had no general grasp of mathematical principles. Many university heads agreed with Robinson's findings that standards are dropping, that lessons are being geared to passing tests and consequently students are showing a limited breadth of understanding in the core curriculum areas.

The growing lack of confidence in the education system is revealed in the fact that around 150,000 parents educate their children at home. This figure is expected to triple by the end of the decade.



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