

UK schools face teacher shortage as government makes derisory pay offer

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UK schools are facing a severe staffing crisis. After an initial fall in the number of COVID-19 cases at the beginning of the year, numbers have been rising dramatically since March. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in schools.

All mitigation measures (insufficient to begin with) were eliminated completely in January, together with free testing in most schools. Last Friday, free testing was ended in special schools as well, leaving even the most vulnerable children with no protection against the spread of the virus.

More and more teachers are being forced to call in sick, meaning schools are having to send children home, sometimes for days at a time. In most cases, online teaching is not available owing to the lack of teachers.

More than 10 percent of pupils missed classes in Wales in the week ending March 25, according to *WalesOnline*.

On the Isle of Man, four schools had to close last week due to teacher absences, leading to the cancellation of face-to-face lessons for hundreds of students.

The Sighthill Community Campus in Glasgow, which houses several primary schools, announced March 22 that parents would have to keep their children at home for three days per week until the Easter holidays. According to the *Glasgow Evening Times*, more than half of the campus' teaching staff are currently absent due to COVID.

School closures due to teacher shortages have taken place across the UK.

COVID absences are compounded by a general shortage of staff throughout the sector. Teacher recruitment was already falling before the pandemic due to years of funding cuts and stagnant pay. After a

brief uptick in 2020, the decline has got worse. Government data released in early March showed the number of new teacher applications has fallen by 23 percent compared to February 2021.

Researchers at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) say there is a "substantial risk" that hiring targets are not going to be met for multiple subjects in the 2022 recruitment cycle. Out of the 19 subjects considered, 14 are estimated to be at risk of falling below target, with subjects that were understaffed before the pandemic (Physics, Modern Foreign Languages, and Computing) joined by subjects that had generally recruited well such as Biology, English, Geography, and Art).

The overwhelming reason for poor recruitment is the abysmal pay and conditions that characterise the sector. The 2008 global financial crash precipitated a decade of "austerity" in the public sector. As a result, after inflation is considered, median teacher pay is about seven to nine percent below the 2010-11 rate, according to the NFER. This is set to get much worse. Inflation has rocketed to 8.2 percent (RPI), on its way to above 10, while teachers' pay was frozen for the 2021-2022 school year.

On March 4, the Department for Education (DfE) recommended to the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) that the starting salary for teachers should reach £30,000 by 2023. It also acknowledged that a "significant" pay rise is needed to overcome the shortage of staff. In its submission to the STRB, the DfE proposed a 16 percent pay rise over two years, with 8.9 percent in 2022-23 and 7.1 percent in 2023-24. However, this only applies to new hires, with the proposal to increase existing teachers' salaries by only 5 percent over two years. Given the rate of inflation, this amounts to a significant pay cut on top of the losses

already suffered.

To receive this pittance, teachers are being asked to work more hours. NFER data shows that before the pandemic the average teacher workload was 47 hours a week. After a brief dip to 40 hours during the first lockdown in 2020, it rose back to 46 hours last academic year.

Jack Worth, NFER's school workforce lead, said, "teacher workload remains a significant issue as more than half of full-time teachers perceive that they work too many hours". In a TES (formerly *Times Educational Supplement*) survey from January 2022, 67 percent of almost 3000 surveyed teachers said their workload was unmanageable.

Teachers are often not even paid for the extra hours they spend working. A report published in February by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) revealed that almost a third (31 percent) of teachers worked unpaid overtime in 2021, up from a quarter (25 percent) in 2020, based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force data from July-September 2021.

In the last two years, heavy workloads and poor pay have been coupled with repeated exposure to COVID. Hundreds of education workers have been killed by the disease. According to the latest ONS figures, the teaching and education sector suffers the joint highest rate of Long COVID of any sector, at 3.79 percent, with 1.64 percent affected for longer than a year.

Low pay, long hours and COVID are combining to drive teachers out of the profession in large numbers. According to NFER's autumn survey of school leaders, a fifth said that staff turnover was higher than before the pandemic. Fifteen percent of new teachers go on to quit after just a year, 25 percent do so within three and 40 percent within ten.

The education trade unions have made a show of outrage in response to the latest recruitment figures. Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT school leaders' union, warned that school leadership supply is "teetering on the brink". Dr Patrick Roach, general secretary of the NASUWT teaching union, said there was "clear and unshakeable evidence of the enormous damage that has been inflicted on the morale of teachers after more than a decade of real-term cuts to teachers' pay". Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union, referred to the "huge damage" caused by "pay cuts, high workload and the

imposition of PRP [performance-related pay]".

What goes unmentioned is that these unions have actively collaborated with the government in imposing the dire conditions teachers confront. They have refused to mobilize teachers in opposition the government's pandemic policies or austerity agenda, suppressing any kind of opposition in the membership.

This was highlighted by the announcement of last year's pay freeze. Despite denouncing the action, the unions did not put forward a single ballot for industrial action let alone organise a joint campaign of all educators and other public sector workers who confront a similar assault on their wages.

The NEU responded by conducting yet another "survey" of its members on pay. Their survey revealed that two-thirds (63 percent) of teachers have considered leaving the profession because of concerns on pay. Well over half of teachers (58 percent) report that they are underpaid compared to other graduate professionals. The survey was the largest on teachers' pay progression, with over 25,000 responding. The NEU has done nothing with the results other than to hand them over to the pay review board whose recommendations are consistently rejected by the government.

The unions' opposition consists entirely of the hot air in which they specialise. Their real agenda is to facilitate the demands of Johnson's Conservative government.

To wage a struggle for a dramatic improvement in wages and conditions, and safety from COVID-19, including the temporary closure of schools, education workers must establish their own rank-and-file committees. These committees can unify workers in the education and whole public sector for the necessary fight against the Tory government and its Labour Party and trade union backers.

Sign up to the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) today.



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