UK schools sinking under teacher retention crisis and billions in funding cuts

Tom Pearce
26 January 2023

The UK's education trade unions have just completed a round of strike ballots on pay but at the heart of workers discontent is a perfect storm of staffing shortages that has been building for years.

"A period of unprecedented turmoil" in teacher vacancies is unfolding according to the TeachVac job website report. shows that 107,063 roles were advertised in 2022. This is substantially more than pre-pandemic numbers. "2022 has been a period of unprecedented turnover in the labour market for teachers and especially for classroom teacher vacancies in the secondary sector", it reported.

During the period between January 1 and the end of July 2021, TeachVac recorded just over 29,000 vacancies across the secondary sector. During the same period in 2022, the recorded number was in excess of 56,000. The period between January and the end of July each year represents the period of time when the majority of teaching posts for September are advertised and filled.

The report notes that vacancies for this academic year will be "especially challenging to fill" and "those schools faced with vacancies for January 2023, especially unforeseen vacancies occurring late in the year, will be extremely lucky to find a suitably qualified teacher to fill their vacancy."

Special schools and alternative provision (AP) are in a particularly bad position having nearly three times more teaching posts filled with temporary workers.

The impact of real terms cuts in pay, the excessive workload of educators, is exacerbated by the lack of recruitment and high levels of stress and anxiety across the sector.

Compounding the crisis, figures for teacher recruitment at the end of 2022 from the Department of Education (DfE) show a serious decline in trainee teachers. The DfE missed its own targets for teacher recruitment in 2022, with overall numbers in training down by 20 percent to 29,000, compared with 36,000 trainees recruited last year. In secondary schools recruitment and retention is at crisis point, with only 59 percent of the Conservative government's target being reached. Recruitment against targets across all phases was the lowest this year since at least 2015.

An unprecedented 13 out of 17 secondary subject areas missed their targets, with the biggest gaps in science and technology. (STEM) A measly 444 physics teachers signed up for training, which equates to one for every eight state secondary schools in England. In computing, 348 graduates entered training, 30 percent of the government's target of 1,145.

The government missed its target for recruitment of new secondary school teachers by 41 percent this year. The secondary target has not been met since 2012/13, except in 2020/21.

There are also dire shortages in primary teachers with 93 percent of the postgraduate initial teacher training target achieved in primary (compared to 131 percent in 2021/22). Of a targeted 11,655 new postgraduate primary trainees, 10,868 were recruited. Significantly, this is the first time since 2019 the primary target has been missed.

The impact has even been highlighted by the education inspectorate, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) whose annual report found that "workforce and resourcing challenges" had forced nurseries to close because they could not retain staff. The crisis had led to larger class sizes in schools and colleges, as well as disruption to activities such as drama and sport, mental health interventions and support for special needs children.

There is little hope that schools can attract the numbers needed to reverse the decline in educators. Many schools are paying out a vast proportion of their budgets on supply teachers to cover gaps in their staffing. *Schools Week* reported that "maintained schools spent a combined £622 million on supply cover in 2021-22, up more than a third year-on-year."

The teacher retention crisis is intensifying as the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) think-tank reports that inflation and a decade of real-terms cuts were "putting severe strain" on education budgets. Head teachers are having to stretch their budgets, with some cutting services and roles within their

© World Socialist Web Site

schools and this has piled more pressure on teachers who are being asked to take on extra work.

DfE statistics show that nearly a third of teachers who qualified in the last decade have since left the profession. Out of just under 270,000 teachers who qualified in England between 2011 and 2020, more than 81,000 have since left the profession, or 30 percent of staff.

A DfE spokesperson said, “We understand that teacher recruitment is challenging, which is why we have taken action to raise the profile of this important and prestigious profession.”

If this was the case then why is there a recruitment crisis? Prestigious infers that teachers would be respected, honoured, well-paid, with a manageable workload—none of which teachers are feeling across the country. This is why a record numbers of teachers are leaving the profession and educators have voted overwhelmingly to strike in order to fight the degradation of education.

With the Conservatives driving down the pay, terms and conditions of educators, the Labour opposition’s pathetic response is a call to remove private schools’ charitable status so VAT sales tax can be taken to raise approximately £1.7 billion a year. This pittance would do nothing to arrest the crisis.

Shadow education secretary Bridget Phillipson commented on the teacher shortage that “this dangerous exodus of new teaching recruits could result in even greater teacher vacancies in years to come and ultimately to lower standards in our schools. That is why we will end tax breaks for private schools and use the money to recruit 6,500 new teachers as part of our national excellence programme.”

6,500 new teachers! A drop in the ocean compared to what is needed! Teachers can be under no illusions that their dire situation will change under a Labour government. Labour’s statements are entire in line with Starmer’s pledge to the ruling elite that never again will Labour get the “its big government chequebook out.”

The state school sector requires tens of billions in extra funding to bring it up to a level anywhere fit for the 21st century. The IFS noted at the start of last year that current government spending for education was set to be 3 percent lower in real-terms by 2024. This amounts to a £2 billion shortfall, enough money to pay for the equivalent of around 38,000 teachers. The previous year the IFS reported that “School spending per pupil in England fell by 9% in real terms between 2009–10 and 2019–20, the largest cut in over 40 years.” This says nothing of the funding required to repair many dilapidated schools. The government’s own figures suggest £11.4 billion is needed to get school buildings to an adequate standard including for safety.

The teaching unions have overseen this decline and are only now organising strike action—on the issue of pay only—after months of delay because they fear the mounting anger from educators will explode out of their control.

Labour and the unions bear major responsibility for the teacher number crisis. During the height of the pandemic, the unions opposed any action to defend their members. Stuffed into unsafe and already overcrowded classrooms, many teachers died and others suffered illness, including debilitating Long COVID. According to official figures 570 educators died in Britain. In January 2022—six months after the government declared the pandemic over—one in 12 teachers was absent from England's schools during the first week of term (8.6 percent of teachers and school leaders were absent, and 4.9 percent were absent because of COVID.

As the pandemic ripped through the population, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer infamously proclaimed that educators must go back to unsafe schools. Schools must stay open he said, “no ifs, no buts, no equivocation.”

Despite all propaganda claiming the opposite, the pandemic is not over. Far from it, with over 1,200 people dying from COVID in the last 14 days in the UK.

Educators everywhere face an untenable crisis: low wages, long hours, short-staffing and impossible job pressures; and the ongoing spread of COVID and other disease—three years of pandemic-related illness, debilitation and death.

The immeasurable toll on educators that has caused can only be halted by the organisation of-rank and-file committees, independent of the corporate trade unions. The fight for a living wage must be taken out of the hands of the teaching union bureaucracies and broadened to encompass demand for the immediate training and recruitment of tens of thousands of teachers, as part of the struggle for a massive uplift in funding for education.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was established in 2020 as the means to break out of the stranglehold of the trade unions bureaucracies, unify workers throughout the education sector, and implement policies in their interests and not subordinate to interests of the capitalist market. We call on you to contact the committee and join the fight to build rank-and-file committees in every school.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site