

Sunak UK government oversees “catastrophic” teacher shortage and education funding crisis

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Teacher numbers in the UK are showing no signs of improving as recruitment and retention of teachers continue to fall due to the pressures of the profession.

The Department for Education (DfE) in England under the control of the Conservative government has slashed its recruitment targets for secondary teacher trainees by 9 percent in response to missing its target by half this year. There is mounting evidence of a deepening supply crisis as year on year the government has missed recruitment targets.

The government sets annual targets against which recruitment is assessed and predicted that there needs to be 23,955 postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT) secondary trainees next academic year to provide enough new teachers for 2025-2026.

However, this target is down from the 26,360 secondary trainees that the DfE said it would need for this year—a target that it missed by half which has sent alarm bells ringing around the sector. Only 50 percent of the 26,360 secondary trainees (13,102) the government said were needed this year were recruited onto courses, prompting school leaders to label once again the teacher shortage as “catastrophic”.

The only outcome is one of desperation for schools who are struggling right now to fill vacant posts. This will only be exacerbated by the reduction of teachers entering the profession in the future. The crisis will not be solved by government fudging the numbers and hoping that teachers will miraculously appear.

The government's other plan is to devalue the profession even further by developing proposals for a new non-graduate route into teaching, labelled the Teacher Degree Apprenticeship (TDA). The TDA will offer an employed route for non-graduates to enter teaching. These apprentices will study for a degree and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) while working in a school over a period of about four years, with about 40 percent of their time spent on academic study each year. The DfE described this as an “earn and learn” approach, attractive to teaching assistants and other career

changers.

The lowering of entry requirements to admit non-graduates to a course of ITT will only undermine teaching as a graduate career choice, making recruitment worse. It also aims to create a two-tier workforce on the cheap.

The recruitment situation is even worse in subjects such as maths, science, art and design suffering from lower numbers, which have therefore seen an increase in targets. Overall, trainee targets increased across eight secondary subjects for 2024-25, and decreased for nine subjects.

There has been some recognition of shortages in the primary targets with the raising of the primary teacher trainee target by 2 percent, from 9,180 to 9,400, after the Tories lowered it last year. The DfE said the increase was a result of primary recruitment and retention forecasts “becoming less favourable this year, leading to a slightly increased need for ITT trainees to meet future demand, despite falling pupil numbers”.

The DfE has justified the reduction due to “more favourable supply forecasts” for both new teachers and returners in the secondary sector. The department also said it has lowered the secondary teacher trainee target this year because the growth of secondary student numbers has slowed.

But this takes no account of the number of educators that are leaving the profession and are also considering a move out of the classroom in the next academic year. The government is totally impervious to the reality that teachers are exhausted, burnt out and leaving the profession in droves. There has been an influx of social media sites that are places of solace for educators. One Facebook site “*Life After Teaching - Exit the Classroom and Thrive*” has over 150,000 members.

In Scotland, under the Scottish National Party-run devolved parliament there is a refusal to staff schools beyond the absolute bare minimum (and sometimes not even to that level) making a difficult job increasingly impossible.

Figures released by the Liberal Democrats show that, since 2018, more than 1,300 new teachers have walked away from the classroom entirely within the first five years, not even taking up a different role within education.

The biggest increases have come from new teachers leaving the profession within three or four years of having qualified. In 2018, 110 individuals fell into this category, but by last year that figure had almost doubled.

Analysis of DfE data the National Association of Head Teachers and school leaders' union (NAHT) shows that England currently has the highest number of unfilled teaching posts in over a decade, with one in seven schools in England reporting at least one vacancy.

Vacancies more than doubled between 2020 and 2022, from 1,098 to 2,334, the NAHT analysis revealed. The union found that one in four secondary schools have reported a vacant or temporary role. Over half of schools in the outer boroughs of London had a job available.

The NAHT call for a “double digit” pay rise for teachers despite Downing Street demanding that pay awards should “return to a more sustainable level”. This would be as low as a 1 percent increase if the independent School Teachers' Review Body (STRB)—which makes pay recommendations in England—is to be believed.

School leaders are asking for at least a 10 percent increase in all teaching salaries. The NAHT stated in evidence submitted to STRB that this is needed to counter the “recruitment and retention crisis”, and the uplift must be higher than average pay settlements in other industries across the country.

Last year hundreds of thousands of teachers—as part of a strike wave across the public and private sectors—went on strike demanding a fully funded, above inflation wage rise of 12 percent. Instead, the education unions, including the NAHT pushed through a sell-out deal of 6.5 percent (of which 3 percent would have to be funded from schools' decimated budgets). The deal was put at the point where for the first time ever all major education unions had passed ballot thresholds for action which could have shut all schools nationally. The response of the union leaders was to sabotage this collective action, with the NAHT declaring that 6.5 percent was “an offer that our members can live with.”

Following this rout, the unions are dialing up the rhetoric again with NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman stating that the union's evidence shows “the real-life impact of the government's neglect of teaching staff over the last decade”.

“It could not be clearer that teachers and school leaders are reacting to eroded salaries and the cost-of-living crisis, as well as increasing workload, pressure and lack of wellbeing, and are leaving the profession,” he said. Whiteman added

that the government needed “to send a clear signal to the workforce that change is coming—that starts with an urgent double digit pay uplift”.

Commenting on the government's decision to cut secondary school training targets, Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), said, “This Government's failure to hit its own teacher training targets stretches back more than a decade. A generation of children have already had to endure the consequences, in many cases taught by teachers without the relevant subject specialism. Teachers and school leaders are forced to bake this into the system, making the best of a bad situation.

He complained of a government “crisis of their own making. A decade-and-a-half of pay cuts. Sky-high workload... The sooner [Education Secretary] Gillian Keegan wakes up to the causes of the shortage, the better the education system will be.”

Why should educators put their trust in the NEU, NAHT, or any of the sell-out unions to challenge the Conservative government on the schools crisis? They have collaborated in a “decade-and-a-half” of cost cutting, below inflation pay deals and sacrificed safety against COVID in schools.

The lessons from these bitter experiences must be drawn to provide the foundation for a genuine fight to defend public education and the pay and conditions of teachers by taking struggle out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy and forming independent rank-and file-committees to fight for education.

The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK) calls for:

- *The immediate abolition of punitive education inspectorate Ofsted.

- *Abolition of all anti-strike legislation including Minimum Service Levels

- * Billions to make schools COVID safe and structurally sound to resolve the RAAC crisis

- * Reduction in class sizes and the fully funded recruitment of tens of thousands of qualified teachers

Sign up to join the committee, read our newsletter and participate in its work.



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