

Teacher shortages

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NUT General Secretary

After months of insisting that there is no teacher shortage crisis, the Government has asked education authorities to give it early warning of schools threatening to move to part time education. A special unit has been set up in the Education Department to try to prevent such threats becoming a reality.

These are hardly the actions of a Government which believes the threat of meltdown has passed. Education Secretary David Blunkett told viewers just two weeks ago that had the Government not acted at the end of March, we would have been very close to meltdown .

The letter from his department seeking advance warning of part-time education went to local authorities just three days before that interview.

All the evidence has been there, and growing, for the Government to see. Both it and the previous Conservative Government had failed to reach their targets for recruitment into training. Drop out rates from training, on completion of training but before entering teaching, and within five years of entering the service were available to it.

The age profile of the profession, now with more than two-thirds of teachers over the age of 40, are easily gleaned from the department s own statistical information.

The NUT had pointed to all these factors both in its evidence to the School Teachers Review Body and in discussions with Education Ministers.

The response was a series of short term measures: bursaries for shortage subjects, golden hellos and then wages for post graduate teacher trainees. None of these addressed the fundamental problem. Each produced a short but limited improvement which was not sustained.

Research for the Union by Professor Alan Smithers, the country's leading expert on teacher supply, showed the lengths head teachers were going to in their attempts to recruit teachers. Cabs were hired to pick up candidates for a post at another school, a retired teacher and local vicar were pressed into a job share to cover a vacancy, a prospective teacher was interviewed over the telephone to Australia, technicians were used as teachers.

Most common was worsening of class sizes for pupils above the age of seven and the removal from teachers of what limited time they had outside the classroom during the school day for support work. Put more children in a class and fewer teachers are needed: deprive the maths teacher, the English teacher, the science teacher of support time or use the art teacher to teach information technology and the problem of inability to recruit is dealt with: no vacancy seems to exist. But larger class sizes, loss of support time and mis-match between subject qualification and subject taught are not the best way to promote high quality education.

In September three schools put their heads above the parapet and went to part-time education because they could not fill teacher vacancies. None of these schools was in London, generally regarded as the area with the greatest recruitment problems. They were in Corby, Slough and Rochester.

Their problems were exacerbated by their lack of access to the backpacking teachers, the teachers who are helping to hold together the capital's education service. When they went home for the millennium celebrations a year ago and returned late, the beginning of term saw teachers being bussed in from places such as Wales by supply agencies to cover the shortfalls.

Those backpackers were concealing the teacher shortages besetting the capital.

But no matter how good, they are temporary and will move on. Such persistent disruption does not bode well for high

quality education. Nor does the growing prospect of more schools being forced to admit they just have not got sufficient teachers.

Yet despite the evidence, the Government until recently insisted no crisis existed. It can no longer maintain that pretence.

Teachers in primary schools work a 53 hour week, in secondary schools it is 51 hours Government figures not mine. And those figures exclude the fundraising teachers do and the clubs and societies they run out side school hours.

The starting salary for a teacher, who must be a graduate and professionally trained is just £16,050 compared with a median salary of £18,300 obtainable by other graduates elsewhere in the economy. That gap, of 14 per cent, gets wider as the years go by.

To cope with the additional cost of living in Inner London, teachers get an extra £2,316. Two year trained police officers have just had a £3,327 increase in that allowance taking the total to £6,000 on top of a salary of £19,713.

Our teachers work in stressful, demanding circumstances. They have responded to initiative after initiative from the Government. Pupil achievement shows consistent improvement. Yet their rewards are small.

The only good news they have had this year has been the departure of Chris Woodhead: but their pleasure at the news does not pay the bills nor does it ensure that the profession can recruit sufficient young people to safeguard the service to educate future generations.

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