

Urgent measures are needed to find and keep good teachers - a precious commodity

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FULL TEXT

Teachers - where will we find them? With the profession regularly under siege from successive governments who like to tinker with the curriculum and exam process, it is not easy to find and retain good teachers. They are a precious commodity.

Now, with the secondary school roll increasing - it will rise by a mighty 19% - there are more students needing more teachers... but where are they?

"We are going to need 19% more secondary teachers and we are struggling to achieve this," says Kate Sida-Nicholls who is in charge of secondary recruitment for Suffolk and Norfolk SCITT - that's the acronym for School Centred Initial Teacher Training and there are a number of them around the country but this one, now 20-years-old and based at the University of Suffolk, in Ipswich, is the biggest in the country.

Teaching should be one of the most fulfilling careers; educating young minds, giving them access to a world of exciting prospects, allowing them to explore and develop their interests. And yet, we all know of teachers who have abandoned the profession, disillusioned with the relentless demands of paperwork and the stress of long working days.

The latest national figures published by the TES and the National Foundation for Educational Research, published to June 2018, show that there was a rise of around 4% in secondary school pupils but a more-than-six per cent drop in the number of teachers. Moreover 10.4 per cent of secondary teachers left the profession in 2016-7.

Despite this, the number of newly-qualified teachers is rising. A crisis looms that will only get worse unless prompt action is taken.

I counted around 100 local vacancies (primary and secondary) for qualified teachers and support staff on website and gave up. In the past year, SCITT had 70 trainees for secondary education. One thing we do know, from Kate, is that every teacher who is trained by SCITT gets a job, 100%. It is a commendation of their training - as well as an indication that teachers are sorely needed. We also know that most train in the area where they live and so local recruitment often means more teachers in local schools.

"I think the Government is now aware of the issue of teacher recruitment."

Kate says it is wrong so much of the media coverage of schools fastens on children's behaviour as schools manage it well. "Everyone is aware of how behaviour affects learning. We do not see reports of the 90% or more of positive behaviour in schools." This skews perception, she says.

"In my leaving speech to secondary trainees, I always tell them that they are within their rights to leave the school but (please) not the profession."

What the profession needs, above all, she says, is for "teachers voices to be heard rather than those of politicians and the media."

"My job is to be enthusiastic about teaching. I still think it's one of the really good jobs."

From SCITT we have a positive story of teachers being trained and progressing in their careers. But you will see from the experience of one former teacher (see below) who has written about her time as a teacher, that it doesn't always work out.

Heading up SCITT is Anna Richards, Kate is the secondary course leader and Dr Sally Wilkinson leads the primary

course.

Together with their partner schools: "We train approximately 250 trainee teachers each year. We were set up in partnership with Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils and now, also with the University of Suffolk," says Kate, who has been with SCITT for seven years.

Kate went to Stowmarket High School and, after university, did her teacher training at Cambridge before teaching English in secondary schools. "I have written a couple of books about (pupil) behaviour and teaching English and I have started my PhD in teacher retention and recruitment."

She will be following a number of teachers through their training and first year of teaching to collect first hand evidence.

"We pride ourselves on our partnership with schools," says Kate.

She acknowledges there is a problem with people's perception of teaching. "I don't think it is seen as the high status profession it should be - after all, they are teaching the future workforce of the country."

"Government ministers would not advise the country on what medicines to take because there is a wealth of evidence to say 'this works' and 'this doesn't'. But with education we don't have that evidence base to call upon in order to push back against politician who, by nature of their politics, will always meddle."

Chartered College of Teaching, of which Kate is a founding fellow, is trying to redress the balance by collecting the evidence, she says. "If they can prove what works it is going to strengthen the hand of teaching profession."

While teacher training currently takes "pretty much 10 months", there are plans afoot, from government, to make this two years in order to give new teachers more support. The Early Career Framework aims to have a positive impact on recruitment and retention but it has not yet been introduced and the issue of funding has not yet been addressed. Kate says it would be easier to find mentors if the role was paid for - currently it is an unpaid add-on to all the other work teachers have to do.

In order to become a teacher, people apply through UCAS (the university application process). As well as Suffolk and Norfolk SCITT there are other local providers including a number of ITT providers in Essex, and the University of East Anglia.

Information evenings will provide potential teachers with more details including of the bursaries that are available to help them through their training although they do have to pay a £9,000 fee. In brief, applicants are shortlisted, then have a two-stage interview. During their year of training, successful applicants are assessed against teacher standards.

To teach at secondary level "people have to want to be with teenagers," says Kate, who clearly enjoys both their company and their learning potential. "Most secondary students are not passionate about maths on a Friday afternoon... so the teachers have to be passionate."

"About 30% of trainees are 'career changers' aged 31 and above. Last year we had six trainees over 40."

To find out more about how to become a teacher you can contact Suffolk and Norfolk SCITT on 01473 265077 or email scitt.admin@suffolk.gov.uk The website is at www.suffolkandnorfolkscitt.co.uk

It is expected there will be a mighty 19% increase in the secondary school roll in the county this year, but it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain good teachers

For one teacher, managing the behaviour of students whilst trying to teach the class was just too much, here she tells why she joined the wave of teachers quitting the profession.

The woman, who asked to be referred to as Rebecca, thought she'd found her perfect career when she landed a job as an NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) at a school in Ipswich, but in reality found nothing but red tape, uncontrollable children and a nonexistent mentor scheme.

"I decided to go into teaching to make a difference," Rebecca said.

"I'd loved being a mentor in my previous job, and seeing people succeed was a great feeling. Win-win. I loved the subject of physics so completed my degree through Open University to enable me to be qualified to teach the subject I was so passionate about.

"I knew that teaching was not going to be easy, but I understood the system had processes in place to help you

deal with everything.

"I found the training hard. The endless lesson plans, reflection journals and inane tasks were a lot to deal with. That was coupled with being pulled apart most lessons for not noticing the one student who was playing with a fidget spinner!

"The second year became harder. The support of my mentor was reduced due to the fact he was on maximum timetable, and struggling to keep on top of his own workload, let alone help me with mine!

"When faced with difficult behaviour in class I wasn't supported. When I issued detentions I was actually challenged for why I'd given them - as if I was the one who had to explain myself and not the student!

"The systems in place which should deal with behaviour had more holes than a sieve and the students knew how to exploit the system, making any behaviour management impossible. So along with the increased timetable, more lesson plans and lack of support, this made it really difficult to teach any meaningful lessons. However, despite all this I did qualify.

"Starting at a new school as a qualified teacher, I hoped the 'robust behaviour system' and new mentor would mean I'd get the support required, so I could teach lessons which would give me purpose and self-worth. However, from the start this wasn't going to happen because I was given all the lower set classes because I had to 'prove myself first'. That meant I was already up against it.

"Very quickly it became apparent that my hopes of support were a pipe dream. The mentor I was supposed to be assigned never was, and the loopholes in the behaviour system meant I got mixed messages of 'you're not being hard enough' and 'you'll never build a rapport'.

"I was again back to not teaching meaningful lessons due to them being wrecked by students. That really hurts because you spend your Sunday afternoons (away from your own kids) to plan. This was a common theme. Late nights, weekend days and evenings - made worse by the endless books, exams to mark and reports to write.

"Tiredness breeds stress and anxiety and I began to suffer with both. Not wanting to go to bed because I didn't want to get up to go to work with fears of not knowing what I'd face that day. Feeling sick every morning driving to work.

"To add to all this, the class sizes are huge (32 in most). When you have students with additional needs in class, along with students with English as a second language and no help from a teaching assistant, it's impossible and you feel you are failing them, which of course gets you down. You feel really worthless and wonder why you bother.

"The sad fact though, is there are some students who look forward to seeing you as you are a constant in their life, due to their home life not being so great. They can't wait for Mondays to learn and look up to you. That's the reason you want to teach- to make a difference. When I started out this journey I was so excited.

"I've now quit and I'm feeling much better already. Sleeping. Happy. Not comfort eating. Not stressing the kids. Teaching? No thanks!"

Kate Sida-Nicholls, in charge of secondary recruitment for Suffolk and Norfolk SCITT (School Centred Initial Teacher Training), one of the largest in the country, based at the University of Suffolk in Ipswich, says nearly 20% more teachers are needed at secondary school level. Stories such as that of Rebecca are commonplace, so how are they going to attract (and keep) staff locally? The latest national figures published by the TES and the National Foundation for Educational Research, published to June 2018, show that 10.4% of secondary teachers left the profession in 2016-7. Despite this, the number of newly-qualified teachers is rising. A crisis looms that could only get worse unless prompt action is taken.

We counted around 100 local vacancies (primary and secondary) for qualified teachers and support staff, just one indication that we need a major recruitment drive.

In the past year, SCITT had 70 trainees for secondary education. One thing we do know, from Kate, is that every teacher who is trained by SCITT gets a job, 100%, which must count for something. It is a commendation of their training - as well as an indication that teachers are sorely needed. We also know that most train in the area where they live and so local recruitment often means more teachers in local schools.

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It's not all doom and gloom

Helen Yapp is deputy head at Thomas Gainsborough School, Cornard

"I never dreamed of becoming a teacher when I was at university but in my early 30s through my work for Marks and Spencer I started to work with a local secondary school to support students who needed help with self confidence and aspirations. I became aware of how many young people needed someone to support them as they didn't necessarily get that support from home. I decided I wanted to do more and so trained as a teacher.

"Eighteen years later and I haven't regretted a single day. It is the most rewarding job. Hard work but the benefits outweigh any difficult days. "Watching a student's face light up when they suddenly understand something; watching that sense of pride when they receive positive feedback; the laughter - provided via staff and students; the tears but then the thanks because you have listened to them; the apologies because sometimes things go wrong; the achievements - not just academic.

"It truly the best job in the world. No day is the same and yes there are things I would change but that is only because in my next life I want to be Prime Minister."

DETAILS

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