

2024

MISSING MOTHERS



A Britain that's got your back

The New Britain Project

The New Britain Project is an independent progressive think tank focused on bridging the gap between politics, policy and practice.

As a female-led organisation, we confront the lack of women in policymaking, bringing new perspectives to the table.

Our focus is on bringing frontline voices into policymaking, so that their insights can drive pragmatic solutions.

Guided by those with first-hand government experience, we effectively navigate the complexities of policy implementation.

Together, we aim to understand the root causes of past policy failures and provide practical measures to drive successful change in the months and years ahead

The MTPT Project

The MTPT Project (MaternityTeacher, PaternityTeacher) are the UK's charity for parent-teachers.

Founded in 2016 by Emma Sheppard, a former teacher working in south London, whilst she was on maternity leave with her first child.

The project grew from a blog and a social media account into the a grassroots network and then a charity working with both schools and at systems level to address the motherhood penalty in education.

Initially supporting teachers and leaders during the parental leave and immediate return to work period through coaching and baby-friendly networking opportunities, The MTPT Project are the national experts on the motherhood penalty in education and how it is negatively impacting our workforce.

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We would like to extend our gratitude to the 962 women who responded to our survey: 383 who left teaching in the state sector in their thirties and 579 who are currently teaching in the state sector between the ages of 30-39.

The MTPT Project completed the first iteration of this study, cited in Figure 6, in 2018 making a clear link between motherhood and teacher attrition amongst female teachers in their thirties.

Special thanks go to the 41 women who then went on to participate in semi structured interviews, generously sharing their time and candid insights for this report.

We would also like to express our thanks to all those from the sector who shared their thoughts throughout our research and drafting of this report.

The arguments and any errors that remain are the authors' and the authors' alone.

1

INTRODUCTION

Breaking the cycle: How retention can solve the recruitment crisis in education

We hear a lot about the recruitment challenge in education - how in recent years we have failed to train enough teachers to meet the needs of our schools. This year alone, we missed the teacher recruitment target by a historic gap of 38%.[1] This shortfall means that we are training 8,585 fewer teachers than we need to ensure every classroom has a teacher up front.[2]

What we hear a lot less about is the retention crisis facing pretty much every school up and down the country.

The new Labour government has pledged to recruit 6,500[3] new teachers as a critical first step - this report argues addressing the retention crisis is crucial, not just because it stabilises our teaching workforce and provides essential mentorship to new teachers, but because better retention directly impacts our ability to solve the challenges we have with recruitment. Only then can we break the vicious cycle the education sector finds itself in.

As Chancellor Rachel Reeves approves an above-inflation pay rise for teachers, this report makes clear that increased pay alone won't be sufficient to stem the tide of teachers leaving the profession; creating a sustainable career requires addressing other foundational needs, particularly for women.

This report focuses on the largest group exiting the profession each year - women in their thirties. However, the recommendations put forward here extend beyond this key demographic, aiming to profoundly impact retention strategies across all teacher cohorts.

SUMMARY

We are in the midst of a double whammy of a recruitment and retention crisis - a situation that has significantly intensified since the pandemic

In 2023, the UK missed its teacher recruitment target by a historic 38%,^[1] leaving a gap of 8,585 teachers.^[2] This shortfall exacerbates the strain on an already overburdened system.

Teacher leaving rates have surged post-pandemic, reversing the temporary decline seen during the crisis. Nearly a third of new teachers leave the profession within five years, and teacher vacancies have more than doubled in the past three years.^[4]

Women in their thirties are the single biggest group leaving teaching each year (and have been since 2017)

Since 2017, women in their thirties have consistently been the largest group exiting the teaching profession annually. In 2023, 9,147 women between the ages of 30 - 39 left the state education system.^[4] Representing 25% of the workforce, their loss is particularly damaging due to their experience and the critical mentoring role they play for newer teachers.^[4]

Although teaching is a female-dominated profession, leadership roles are not equally distributed, further complicating retention efforts.^[4]

Losing so many experienced teachers is exacerbating issues with behaviour and workload, creating a vicious cycle

The mass departure of experienced teachers disrupts school stability, leading to increased behaviour issues and workloads for remaining staff. This instability and heightened pressure creates a vicious cycle, further accelerating teacher attrition across all experience levels.

Addressing retention is crucial; without it, resolving our recruitment challenges will remain elusive

Retaining more of the 9,147 female leavers aged 30-39 would not just help cover our recruitment shortfall,^[4] it would also provide greater stability and support for those entering the profession. New teachers need supportive mentors, and experienced colleagues to learn from, to provide perspective, and to demonstrate that teaching is a journey – a lifelong and sustainable journey, not one that is over in five years.

Workload remains the top reason for leaving, and its impact has intensified since 2018

Excessive workload remains the leading cause of teacher departures, cited by 75% of respondents in our 2024 survey, up from 69% in our 2018 survey. The post-pandemic landscape has amplified mental health concerns, rising from 50% to 57% over the same period. Teachers report escalating emotional and mental strain, further exacerbated by increased accountability measures and reduced budgets. In contrast, only 14% of those we surveyed who had left teaching identified financial reasons as one of the primary drivers for their departure.

Top factors driving mothers from teaching: Workload, Family, and Inflexibility

For women who are mothers aged 30-39, our survey indicates the decision to leave teaching is heavily influenced by three key factors:

1. Excessive workload
2. Family commitments
3. Lack of flexible working arrangements

56% of mother - teachers in this age group cite the conflict between job demands and personal responsibilities as a primary reason for leaving. This trend is eroding the long-held perception of teaching as a family-friendly career.

Flexibility: The key to retaining mother-teachers

Teachers, particularly mothers, aren't seeking fully remote work. Instead, the need for simple yet meaningful accommodations was a key theme expressed in the open responses in our survey and in follow up interviews:

1. Ability to attend significant events in their children's lives
2. More adaptable timetabling options

Currently, many mother-teachers feel forced to choose between their own children and their students due to inflexible work schedules. Implementing practical flexibility policies could significantly reduce turnover and enhance workforce stability.

It's counterproductive to lose experienced teachers simply because some schools can't offer the basic flexibility now common in most other professions. Working together to address this issue, the government and schools can retain valuable teachers and strengthen our education system.

Retaining female teachers in their thirties should be the Government's top retention priority

We are in the midst of an unprecedented recruitment and retention crisis. Much of the current retention focus and investment is on early career teachers, and while it is true that too many of them leave, the more pressing issue is the exodus of women in their thirties. Prioritising their retention will cause a pivotal shift, ensuring that more experienced teachers remain in the profession. This will help stabilise the workforce, provide essential mentorship to new teachers, and ultimately break the cycle of unsustainable levels of teacher attrition.

Our proposed retention strategy for this group

1. Improved support for mothers returning to work

The Challenge: Over half of women who leave in their thirties are mothers. Since existing return to teaching programmes have had low success rates, we are better off stopping these teachers leaving in the first place. The critical period for this is immediately post-maternity leave but we know from our research that very few mothers are currently satisfied with the support they receive to aid their transition back to school.

- We propose a comprehensive coaching programme for mothers during, and post-maternity leave, aiming to support both the teachers and their line managers. By 2030, this offer should be available to all mothers, provided in both group settings and one-to-one sessions.

2. Priority childcare places for teachers

The Challenge: The lack of on-site childcare in schools significantly impacts teacher retention, particularly for those with young children. Flexibility at the beginning and the end of the school day goes some way in supporting teachers to manage the conflicting logistics of childcare and the timing of the school day. For nearly 40% of our teacher-mother respondents who left, access to on site childcare would have helped them stay in the classroom.

- The Labour party has committed to opening 3,000 new school based nurseries over the next parliament. We propose that as these are set up, priority places are given to the children of staff working at the nursery, staff at the school where the nursery is based, and staff working in local schools.
- Currently, some schools offer priority places to the children of their own employees. We recommend that all schools offer such priority places, not just to teaching staff in their schools, but to any teacher, leader or member of support staff in the local authority. These priority places should also extend to wraparound care to support teachers to balance childcare commitments with the logistics and timings of the school day.

3. Gender equality across the school workforce

The Challenge: Teaching is a predominantly female profession, and yet women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly in secondary schools. In these settings, men are 2.3 times more likely to become head teachers than women. Increasing the number of women in leadership can create a self-fulfilling cycle, encouraging more women to pursue these roles and help break down existing barriers. Poor maternity pay compared to other similar graduate careers also cements the view that teaching is no longer a family friendly career: too often, female teachers are choosing between career and motherhood, or slowing their career progression to become mothers. Improving maternity pay and introducing a national offer of equal parental leave would help retain more of our experienced mother teachers and attract more men into the profession.

- The Department for Education should commit to achieving gender parity in leadership in education. This would require an additional 2,639 female headteachers.
- The Burgundy Book should be updated to adopt equal and improved parental leave policies. This update should match the 26 weeks of fully paid parental leave enjoyed by colleagues working at the Department for Education (DfE), supporting both men and women in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities.
- Recruitment campaigns must move beyond traditional narratives such as 'do it for the kids' or 'go above and beyond'. Instead they should redefine teaching as a family friendly and sustainable career.

4. Schools embrace flexibility as a solution to a problem, rather than a problem to be solved

The Challenge: Too few schools offer flexible working to their staff. Too many teachers, especially women, and especially mothers leave because they are not able to fit a career in teaching around their personal responsibilities. Too many school leaders view flexible working as impossible or undesirable in education and so actively discourage or reject flexible working requests from their staff.

- Introduce Flexible Working Champions in the 1,000 schools that need them most by the end of this parliament.
- Design and implement a fully funded and accredited CPD course focusing on the change management and practical skills needed to create a more flexible and enduring teaching career. This programme should include training in areas such as timetabling, strategic planning, and fostering a supportive school culture to ensure long-term success.
- Require all timetabling software providers in the UK to sign up to uniform data standards so that we can build a comprehensive knowledge base of best practices and innovations in flexible working and workload management.

3

WHY RETENTION CAN SOLVE THE RECRUITMENT CRISIS

We hear a lot about the recruitment challenge in education - how in recent years we have failed to train enough teachers to meet the needs of our schools. This year alone, we missed the teacher recruitment target by a historical gap of 38%.[1] This shortfall means that we are training 8,585 fewer teachers than required to ensure every classroom has a teacher up front.[2]

What we hear a lot less about is the retention crisis facing pretty much every school up and down the country.

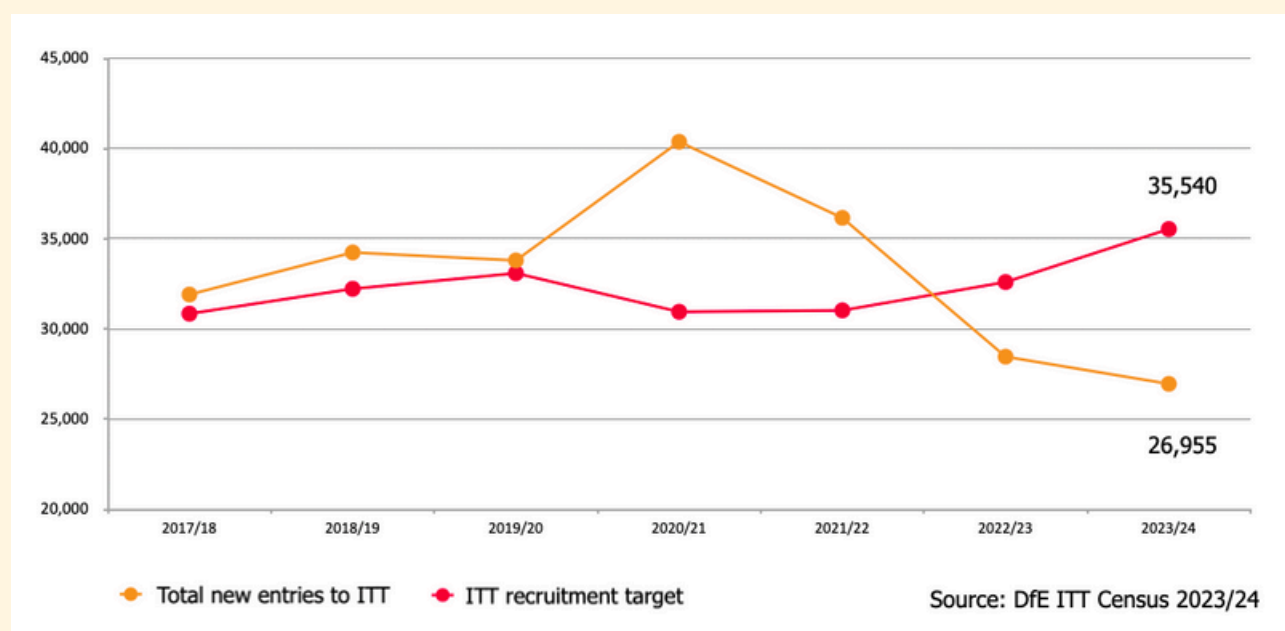
And yet addressing the retention crisis is crucial, not just because it stabilises our teaching workforce, but because it directly impacts our ability to solve the recruitment challenge. Without retaining experienced teachers, we perpetuate the cycle of shortages and instability in our schools.

This report focuses on the largest group exiting the profession each year - women in their thirties. Increased pay is undeniably important, but it is not the sole solution; creating a sustainable career requires addressing other foundational needs, particularly for women. However, the recommendations put forth here extend beyond this demographic, aiming to profoundly impact retention strategies across all teacher cohorts.

We are in the midst of a double whammy of a recruitment and retention crisis which has significantly intensified since the pandemic

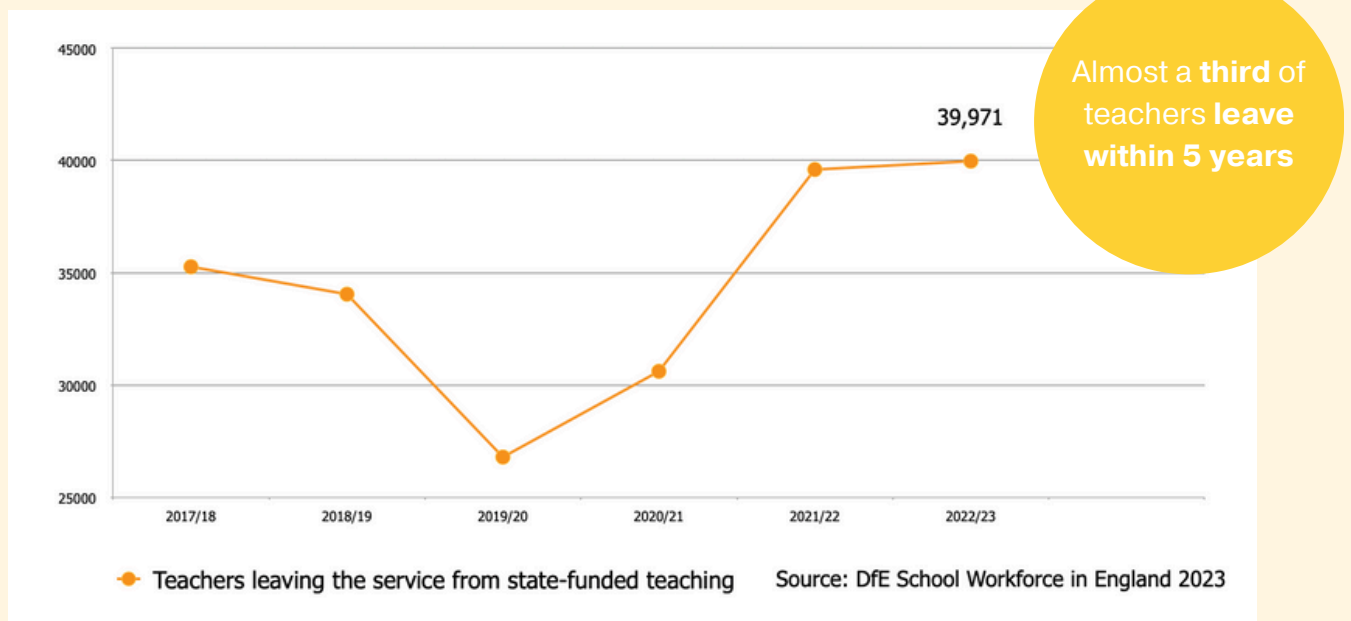
Recruitment for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) is historically low. In the past year, the target for recruiting trainee teachers at the secondary level has been met only once. In 2023, the combined recruitment target for both primary and secondary teacher training was missed by 38%. This shortfall equates to 8,545 fewer trained teachers than needed.

Figure 1: Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Recruitment vs Target



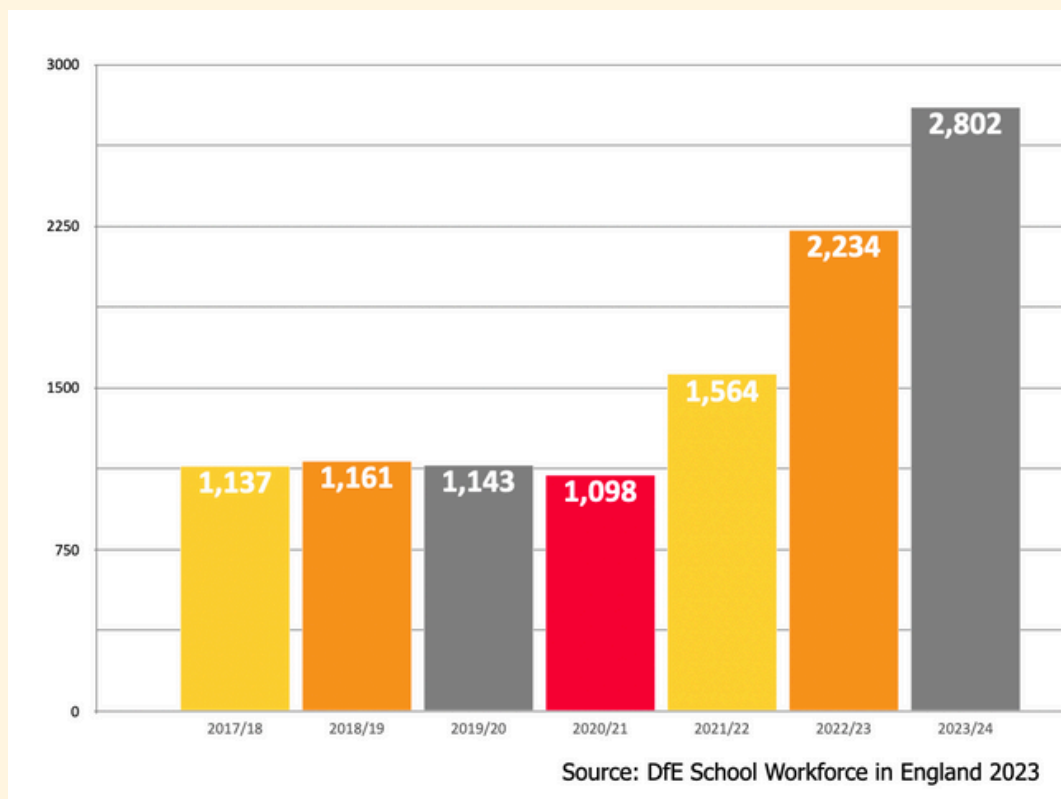
The post-pandemic period has seen an upward trend in the number of teachers exiting the profession.

Figure 2: Number of teachers leaving the state sector each year



Teacher vacancies have more than doubled in the last three years.

Figure 3: Number of teachers vacancies



Women in their thirties are the single biggest group leaving teaching each year (and have been since 2017)

Women in their thirties comprise 27% of the workforce, outnumbering male teachers across all age brackets.

Figure 4: Teacher workforce breakdown by age and gender in the English state sector 2023/24

Age Group	Female	Male
Total	388,688	124,891
Under 25	18,428	4,445
25 to 29	55,545	17,070
30 to 39	127,910	42,172
40 to 49	109,012	34,520
50 to 59	67,604	22,569
60 and over	10,193	4,117

Source: DfE School Workforce in England 2023

Women aged 30-39, are the single biggest group that leave the English state education sector each year, totalling more than 9,000.

Figure 5: Number of teachers who left the English state sector by age and gender in the year 2022/23

Age Group	Female	Male
Under 25	2,160	472
25 to 29	5,981	1,886
30 to 39	9,147	3,452
40 to 49	6,832	2,366
50 to 59	6,458	2,408
60 and over	1,669	668

Source: DfE School Workforce in England 2023

Losing so many experienced teachers is exacerbating issues with behaviour and workload, creating a vicious cycle

“As a teacher you’re supposed to be providing stability for kids, especially these kids that were in very difficult circumstances outside of school. But if you’re constantly getting new staff or supply staff, then obviously, you go back to the start with the behaviour management and behaviour support.”

Secondary middle leader

“When the children came back into school post Covid, the kids were expecting more and more out of you, and less and less out of themselves.”

Secondary middle leader - left in 2022 with 15 years experience

Addressing retention is crucial; without it, resolving our recruitment challenges will remain elusive

Retaining the 9,147 female leavers aged 30-39 would not just cover our recruitment shortfall, it would also provide greater stability and support for those entering the profession. New teachers need supportive mentors, and experienced colleagues to learn from, to provide perspective, and to demonstrate that teaching is a journey – a lifelong and sustainable journey, not one that is over in five years.

“Mentoring isn’t just a mentor meeting for an hour a week. It’s the time you drop in and support a lesson. If they’re having a difficult time it’s the work you do with them to check in with them. To make sure that they’re okay with the lessons they’re planning. Sitting with them because they’re upset about something. It’s so much work and it’s not properly understood.”

Secondary senior leader - left 2024 with ten years experience

Losing so many experienced teachers each year is a vicious circle. It reduces the pool of teachers who can support trainees to develop effectively. And it reduces the pool of experienced teachers pupils encounter. Holding high expectations of behaviour, providing consistently high quality teaching and learning, and establishing strategies to reduce teacher workload and boost wellbeing, are made even more difficult with a weakened workforce.

Workload remains the top reason for leaving, and its impact has intensified since 2018

Figure 6: Responses from our survey in 2024 compared with the responses in 2018 on principal reasons for leaving UK state school teaching

What were your principal reasons for leaving UK state school teaching? (Please tick all that apply)	2024	2018
Workload	75%	69%
Mental health/ wellbeing	57%	50%
Lifestyle choice - i.e. wanting to work fewer hours, seeking a better work-life balance or to pursue other interests	54%	53%
Family commitments	51%	42%
Lack of flexible/ part time working arrangements in teaching	51%	33%
School culture	45%	38%
Childcare logistics	42%	32%

Whilst workload remains the most influential reason why women in their thirties leave the teaching profession, mental health concerns have become more significant, increasing from 50% in 2018 to 57% in 2024.

Survey and interview responses point to the post-pandemic environment as a reason for these increases. Time and time again we heard about schools and teachers being left to pick up the pieces post-pandemic.

“I feel like I’m a teacher, social worker, child psychologist, family support worker as well as trying to teach full time & be a mum.”

Primary middle leader

While there has been notable progress in reducing tangible aspects of high workload in schools, like planning, marking, and feedback. The issue extends beyond what is typically understood as workload. Many of those who have left teaching, as well as those who have stayed, have shared that the most exhausting part of the job is the constant mental strain and emotional fatigue due to the intensification of the school day. Increased needs and challenge, increased accountability and pressure coupled with a decrease in budget to deliver are bringing teachers to their knees.

“I work long hours. I work at least 10 hours every day that I’m working, if not sometimes 12. But for me it’s not the long hours, it’s more the intensity of those hours. The time that you’re working is so mentally, emotionally, physically, psychologically exhausting that when you come home from those hours, I just feel like I can’t really function and do anything apart from just lie down on the sofa.”

Secondary senior leader - left 2024 with ten years experience

“I honestly think that the pressure on teachers is just so great as you can never reach the end of your list, you can never do everything and therefore often feel like you have never done enough.”

Primary classroom teacher - left 2017 with over a decades experience

“I’m afraid to say teaching and motherhood for me were incompatible - I just couldn’t do both justice”

Secondary middle leader - left in 2023 with 12 years experience

For Mothers, Workload, Family Commitments, and Lack of Flexibility Are the Three Most Influential Reasons for Leaving

As well as workload and mental health, the lack of flexible working arrangements has become a much more pressing issue, rising sharply from 33% to 51% as a reason for leaving between 2018 and 2024. This is despite the efforts over the last four years to increase flexible working practices in schools.

Figure 7: Principal reasons for leaving UK state school teaching according to responses from mother teachers

What were your principal reasons for leaving UK state school teaching? (Please tick all that apply)	2024
Workload	76%
Family commitments	65%
Lack of flexible/ part time working arrangements in teaching	56%

Teaching is often perceived as a 'family-friendly career' because of its long holidays and shorter days. Some women and mothers still manage to thrive both professionally and personally, but this is now more the exception than the rule. For many teachers, especially those with young children, teaching has become not only less family-friendly but increasingly unsustainable as a career.

“I loved teaching for many years. It was just the best job being around children all the time, absolutely great. And then I had my own children.”

Primary classroom teacher - left 2023 with 12 years experience

“I miss it every day, it’s a bit of a grieving process, it’s still my identity. So I find that really, really hard. I thought I would be a career long teacher. It was never my intention to leave.”

Secondary Deputy Headteacher - left 2022 with 14 years experience

Interviews and survey responses highlighted a unique conflict between parenting and professional identities. Many teacher mothers we spoke to felt that the education system expected them to prioritise other people’s children over their own.

“Why should my children come second to those I teach?”

Primary senior leader - left in 2019 with over a decade of experience

“It was not possible for me to be available for my children the way they want other parents to be available for their children.”

Secondary classroom teacher

“The irony of working in education is that you are never able to make contact with your own kids’ educational setting. I’m lucky if [my own children’s] class teachers recognise me.”

Primary classroom teacher and SEND co-ordinator

Compounding this conflict is the increasing flexibility – particularly post-pandemic – enjoyed in other professions. Whilst pre-pandemic only around 1 in 8 employees in similar professions reported working at home, this figure is nearer two thirds of graduates working either fully remote or in a ‘hybrid’ arrangement.[5]

Many of these mother-teachers are not choosing to quit teaching: rather, they feel that they have been placed in an impossible position, unable to do the job they love, and fill the demands of their parenting roles.

Yet amongst those who had left teaching from those we surveyed, lack of flexible or part-time working arrangements contributed to the decision to leave for more than half (56%) of women aged 30-39.



Figure 8: What can flexible working look like in schools?

Flexible solution	Description
Part time work/job share	Working less than full time hours. Two or more people doing one job and splitting the hours
Phased retirement	Gradually reducing working hours or responsibilities to transition from full-time work to full-time retirement
Varied hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staggered hours: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Different start, finish and break times • Compressed hours: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Working full-time hours but over fewer days • Annualised hours <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Working hours spread across the year, or where hours vary across the year to suit the school and employee.
In-year flexibility ('informal' flexibility)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal or family days: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Days of authorised paid leave during term time to which all employees in a school are entitled • Lieu time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Paid time off work for having worked additional hours • Home or remote working: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The employee carries out work off site. For example, Planning Preparation and Assessment time conducted off site, or leaders carrying out some duties from home

Source: EEF Review of flexible working approaches (2023) [6]

We know in teaching the opportunity to work remotely is much more limited. While around a fifth of teachers work part time in some capacity, our understanding of how and where teachers are working flexibly is patchy and inconsistent.[6] This lack of data makes it difficult to share best practice and move cultures forward when it comes to flexible working.

Getting flexibility right is key to retaining mothers in the classroom

Figure 9: Factors that might have helped mother teachers stay in UK state school teaching

Which of the following might have helped you stay in the teaching profession longer? (Select all that apply)	2024
More timetable flexibility (e.g. ability to start/end earlier)	68%
More ad hoc flexibility (e.g. ability to attend child activities/appointments)	63%
Access to on-site childcare	37%
Ability to work part-time	32%
Better support transitioning back after maternity leave	27%

Teachers understand that fully-remote working isn't a realistic expectation; rather, it is simple but meaningful accommodations that would make the difference to mother-teachers' decision to stay in, or leave the profession.

Mother-teachers are cognisant of the advantage of being able to share the school holidays with their children, but when asked what might have kept them in the classroom, they highlighted the need for ad hoc flexibility to attend significant term-time events in their children's lives. Once again, the lack of flexibility in teaching emphasises the conflict between feeling forced to choose between their own children, and the students in their care.

It's absurd that we're losing such experienced teachers simply because some schools can't offer them this basic flexibility.

"I left because I didn't want to keep missing milestone events in my children's lives - assemblies, sports days, nativities."

Primary classroom teacher - left 2022 with 14 years experience

"We expect parents to attend meetings at our school, yet it is frowned upon when parents need time to meet with the SENDCO at their child's school."

Primary middle leader

"If I had been able to find a school willing to offer a 3 or 4 day role that was committed to supporting staff to be there for family commitments such as nursery events, nativities etc then I would have loved to stay teaching."

Primary classroom teacher - left in 2021 with over a decade of experience

"My head teacher has 3 children and so I think she's got a better understanding of it than some schools perhaps do. I was allowed to go and see my son's Christmas play at nursery. I was allowed to do drop-off one day a week. He's got a sports day coming up. I don't feel afraid to ask for that time off."

Secondary Middle Leader

For those mother teachers who have stayed in teaching - a school culture that understood and supported parental needs was key

Figure 10: Factors that have enabled mother teachers to stay in UK state school teaching

How important if at all were each of the following in your decision to remain teaching?	Extremely important/important
Supportive school policies/culture around parental needs	95%
Work-life balance accommodations	94%
Flexibility around child care/family obligations	94%
Ability to find part-time roles	71%

"I think as a school, we do really value experienced teachers, and we're grateful to keep hold of them."

Primary - senior leader

"Our head encourages parents to go to sports days or Christmas activities. There's never a problem with having time for that because when her children were young the head that she worked for wouldn't let people take time off for that so I'm lucky in that way."

Primary - senior leader

Because of the lack of data available for ad hoc flexibility, we know little about how many schools are creating these positive working environments. However, when flexible working is embedded into a school culture, it acts as a powerful recruitment and retention strategy. Schools like Didcot Girls' School demonstrate how effective flexible working can be and the positive impact it can have on retaining staff across all levels.

Figure 11: Flexible working case study from Didcot Girls' School

At Didcot Girls' School, we prioritise flexibility in all aspects of school life. To attract and retain our staff effectively, we demonstrate through our actions that there are various models of optimal working. This approach has enabled us to maintain open communication with our teachers, making them feel valued when deciding on their working arrangements.

Central to our strategy is transparency and open communication. We ensure complete freedom around working requests, allowing for personalised discussions about what we can co-create. All job roles, both internal and external, are advertised as open to part-time or flexible working requests, ensuring no barriers to career progression.

We meticulously review the calendar to eliminate pinch points and limit afterschool meetings to one per week. The calendar is published early to give staff ample time to make their arrangements, which we know makes a significant difference.

Flexibility is a culture - and it is not a culture embedded in schools

Our research findings clearly illustrate that for flexible working to succeed in schools, there must be a strong culture that recognises its value, enabling schools to navigate and overcome the operational challenges inherent in implementing it. Without this cultural foundation, flexible working, even when implemented, may not achieve its full potential.

“At times it can feel like I should be grateful to have been granted flexible working and there has been little practical support to make it a success.”

Secondary senior leader

*“I had to give up my TLR * to work part time. I requested a job share and they said that was impossible. I think it could have worked if they had let me try”*

Secondary classroom teacher

“I have one day off - that's the only flexible working they do.”

Secondary Assistant Headteacher

“It was so clear that no one wanted me to be part time, and no one was willing to try to make it work.”

Secondary Deputy Headteacher - left in 2022 with 14 years experience

“In leadership there certainly isn't the culture of part time. You need to have somebody quite brave to go before you for it to be deemed to be acceptable.”

Secondary Middle Leader

A core theme that emerged from our research is the difficulty many women faced in navigating requests for flexible or part-time working. The process was often described as chaotic, with slow responses making it challenging to secure necessary childcare. We found some headteachers hesitated to approve these requests, fearing it would set a precedent for the entire school workforce.

Even when flexibility was granted, support from the school or leadership team to make it work for both parties could be lacking, leaving teachers feeling guilty or less valued as their commitment to the job was questioned. Conversely, in schools where flexible working was well-implemented, teachers felt respected and trusted as qualified professionals.

“My school agreed to reduce my hours to 0.6 (3 days a week) but then spread those hours across the week at times that just suited the timetabling needs of the school.”

Secondary classroom teacher - left in 2017 with over a decade of experience

“I ended up having all the responsibilities with less pay and less time”

Secondary middle leader - left in 2023 with over a decade experience of experience

*TLR (Teaching and Learning Responsibility) is extra pay given to teachers who take on additional responsibilities, such as becoming a Head of Department, Subject Lead, or taking on a pastoral role like Head of Year.

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“Totally tokenistic. Let me be part time but no job share. Suddenly put me on morning duty despite agreement due to childcare drop I couldn't do this. Met on days I didn't work. Made comments about part time. They clearly didn't believe in part time so should not have offered it.”

Secondary senior leader - left in 2022 with over a decade of experience



4

HOW RETENTION CAN BREAK THE CYCLE**Retaining female teachers in their thirties should be the Government's top retention priority**

We are in the midst of an unprecedented recruitment and retention crisis. While much of the current focus and investment is on retaining early career teachers, and it is true that too many of them leave, the more pressing issue is the exodus of experienced women teachers in their thirties.

This demographic, which constitutes the largest group of teachers and includes many with over a decade of experience, is essential to the stability and strength of our education system. Prioritising their retention will cause a pivotal shift, supporting both more experienced and newer teachers to remain in the profession. This experienced cohort is crucial for mentoring and supporting new teachers, which is a key strategy highlighted in the Department for Education's own retention strategy.[7]

When experienced teachers leave, new teachers lack the mentorship and support they need, which exacerbates their likelihood of leaving the profession early. By focusing on retaining experienced teachers, we create a win-win situation: stabilising the workforce, providing essential mentorship to new teachers, and ultimately breaking the cycle of unsustainable levels of teacher attrition.

1

Improved support for mothers returning to work

Over half of women teachers in their early thirties are mothers, rising to over three quarters for those between 35 - 39.[8]

The post-maternity period is critical in supporting more women to remain in the profession. Findings from our survey show that at present very few mother teachers, both those who have stayed and those who left, are satisfied with the support they received to aid their transition back to school.

Figure 12: Proportion of teachers satisfied or very satisfied with maternity leave and transition support provided by their school according to our survey

	Leavers	Stayers
Satisfied with the maternity leave and transition support provided by your school	27%	38%

While we know thousands of teachers do return to the state sector each year, we do not yet understand enough about who they are and what drives them to return.[4] And it is difficult and costly to support them to do so once they have left.

Of the 5,729 expressions of interest to the Department for Education's 2018 Return to Teaching pilot, only 26 teachers returned to the classroom to teach Ebacc subjects by the following September at a cost of £37,400 each.[9] This highlights a significant gap in the effectiveness of current return-to-teaching programs.

The over 50% of respondents to our survey who had left teaching but expressed a potential willingness to return to the profession, will therefore face challenges and inefficiencies in the support systems designed to re-integrate them back into the workforce.

Given the current evidence (or lack thereof) around supporting returners as well as budgetary constraints, focusing on retaining this key demographic at the most opportune time instead would likely generate better outcomes.

For 27% of the mother-teachers we surveyed who have now left teaching - better support transitioning back post maternity leave could have helped them remain in the profession.

Recommendation 1: We propose a comprehensive coaching programme for mothers during, and post-maternity leave, aiming to support both the teachers and their line managers. By 2030, this offer should be available to all mothers who want to access it, provided in both group settings and one-to-one sessions.

To achieve this, we recommend starting with a pilot program in 2025, initially supporting 500 mothers, and gradually increasing in response to demand and programme evaluation. The cost is estimated at £1,500 per mother.

Alongside this coaching offer should be training for the line managers and senior leaders welcoming returning teachers back into school ensuring that they are aware of their legal duties and the best practice that will support the retention of returning mothers. The cost is estimated at £250 per school.

The funding and partner model should be similar to National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), where the government automatically covers the cost to all eligible participants from a range of providers.

Integral to the programme should be a built-in evaluation process to enable ongoing refinement and track both immediate and long-term outcomes. Assessments should be conducted not just after one year, but also at three and five-year intervals. This is particularly crucial for this cohort of women, who may cycle in and out of the profession, have multiple children, and may not be for instance seeking promotion in the early months of their return. The key measure of success therefore should be retaining more women over a five-year period.

Coaching is not a silver bullet and in itself will not fix the damaging consequences of the motherhood penalty in education. This is in part because there are so many variables specific to each parent, each workplace, family set up and regional and professional context.

But coaching is one of the most effective tools to support returning parents exactly because it does not offer fixed answers or directives in the same way that expert-lead training (such as the Early Career Framework or National Professional Qualifications) do. Rather, it provides individuals with the resilience, capacity and problem-solving skills to navigate their very personal journey within the confines of their professional system.

It is for this reason that a coaching approach - rather than a more structured programme of training - has been adopted for maternity and paternity returners in other sectors (such as Met Babies,[10] or Ernst and Young,[11]) as a retention and talent management strategy.

2

Priority childcare places for teachers

The lack of on-site childcare in schools significantly impacts teacher retention, particularly for those with young children. Flexibility at the beginning and the end of the working day goes some way in supporting teachers to manage the conflicting logistics of childcare and the timing of the school day.

“There was no childcare available that started early enough or finished late enough for me to be able to get to school in time or stay at school for long enough in the afternoons. On site childcare would have enabled me to stay.”

Primary classroom teacher - left in 2018 with over a decade of experience

In the NHS it is common practice for on-site nurseries to give priority access to NHS staff and those working in the emergency services. Indeed MP's themselves also get priority access to the on-site provision in Westminster. However, recognising the crucial role that providing priority school places for staff plays in retention has only recently been adopted by schools by allowing priority access for staff children in their admissions codes. This practice is still not widespread and rarely includes nursery provision.

Since 2013, schools have been able to include in their admissions code provision to give priority in their oversubscription criteria to children of statutory school age and above of staff in either or both of the following circumstances:[12]

- Where the member of staff has been employed at the school for two or more years at the time of application.
- Where the member of staff is recruited to fill a vacant post for which there is a demonstrable skill shortage.

During the General Election of 2024, the Labour party committed to opening 3,000 new nurseries based in schools over the next parliament.[13] As these are set up, we would like them to include in their admissions code priority for school and nursery staff as standard.

For nearly 40% of our teacher-mother respondents who left, access to on site childcare would have helped them stay in the classroom.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that all 3000 newly established nurseries in schools include a provision in their admissions code to give priority to children of school and nursery staff. This policy should be standardised across all new nurseries the new Labour government has pledged to deliver.

Recommendation 3: Currently, some schools offer priority places to the children of their own employees. We recommend that all schools offer such priority places, not just to teaching staff in their schools, but to any teacher, leader or member of support staff in the local authority. These priority places should also extend to wraparound care to support teachers to balance childcare commitments with the logistics and timings of the school day.

3

Gender equality across the school workforce

Teaching is a predominantly female profession, and yet women are significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly in secondary schools.[4]

In these settings, men are 2.3 times more likely to become head teachers than women. This stark disparity highlights a systemic issue. A key barrier is the perception that senior leadership roles are incompatible with family life, compounded by the fact that few leadership roles are advertised as open to flexible working. This deters women from aspiring to these positions. Increasing the number of women in leadership can create a self-fulfilling cycle, encouraging more women to pursue these roles and help break down existing barriers.

Figure 13: Gender distribution of teachers and leadership roles in English state schools

2023/24	Female	Male	Female proportion	Male Likelihood Differential
<i>State-funded nursery and primary</i>				
Total teachers	185,445	32,957	85%	
Assistant head teacher	10,404	2,264	82%	1.2
Deputy head teacher	8,941	2,244	80%	1.4
Head teacher	12,420	4,389	74%	2.0
<i>State-funded secondary</i>				
Total teachers	137,589	79,846	63%	
Assistant head teacher	9,097	6,869	57%	1.3
Deputy head teacher	2,975	2,867	51%	1.7
Head teacher	1,652	2,194	43%	2.3

Source: DfE School Workforce in England 2023: FTE

The elephant in the room, however, is that we are yet to understand how to entice more men into the teaching profession in general. Implementing strategies that make teaching a family-friendly career choice could do as much to persuade current and aspiring fathers into the classroom, as they could to support more women into leadership positions.

One key issue is the perception that senior leadership roles in schools are incompatible with part-time work or formalised flexibility. This notion impacts staff retention in two significant ways. Firstly, it leads to the premature departure of women already in senior leadership, who feel unable to balance their professional duties with parental responsibilities. Secondly, it deters women from aspiring to or pursuing senior roles when they become parents, as they lack role models who successfully navigate both flexible working arrangements and the demands of leadership. Consequently, many opt for alternative careers that offer more viable progression paths.

To achieve gender parity, we need an additional 2,639 female headteachers across English schools.

This move would not only balance the scales but also help inspire future generations of female teachers to pursue leadership positions and remain in the profession - an essential component in breaking the cycle of poor retention. Achieving this balance would begin to fundamentally shift the culture within education, fostering an environment where women at all levels feel supported, valued, and empowered to advance their careers. This cultural change is a crucial first step for establishing long-term sustainability and equity in the teaching profession.

“My head ‘didn’t believe in part time SLT’ so I had to either return from maternity leave full time or not at all.”

Secondary senior leader - left in 2023 with over a decade of experience

“I’m on SLT and don’t really want to take a step down but also don’t really want to be full-time but don’t feel like I have the choice.”

Secondary senior leader

So if we are to truly realise this ambition of equality within education, this shift cannot just be about women. It needs to be about creating an inclusive environment where both men and women can balance their professional and personal responsibilities effectively. We need more men entering the profession who are also able to juggle leadership roles with family commitments. By fostering a culture of flexibility and shared responsibilities, we can create a more equitable and supportive environment for everyone.

Recommendation 4: The Department for Education should commit to achieving gender parity in leadership in education. This would require an additional 2,617 female headteachers. By openly acknowledging this issue and committing to a bold goal, the Department for Education will spark the crucial conversations needed to begin to address and rectify the imbalance. These goals, though not enforceable targets, will serve as essential benchmarks to measure progress and highlight the importance of gender balance. Through annual monitoring and reporting on this progress, coupled with showcasing and visiting schools that are leading the way, it can inspire and guide others on this important journey. Trusts and governors also have a vital role to play in this effort.

Many outside education are shocked by the woeful occupational maternity pay and leave offered to teachers. Compared to other graduate professions such as law or banking, and even public sector roles like those in the NHS or Met police, teachers receive significantly less generous maternity packages. Whilst some local authorities such as Camden,[14] and multi-academy trusts such as Dixons[15] offer much more generous packages, they are an exception. The overwhelming majority of teachers are employed under the provisions set out in the 'Burgundy Book.' [16] This document, agreed upon by the five teacher trade unions and the National Employers' Organisation for School Teachers, outlines conditions such as notice periods, and sickness and maternity schemes.[17] There have been no changes to the occupational maternity leave pay outlined in the 'Burgundy Book' over the past twenty years.[18]

Figure 14: Comparative Analysis of Maternity Leave Policies by Employer

Employer	Full Pay	90%	Half Pay	Total Weeks (Paid at Enhanced Rate)	Equal Pay Offered to Both Parents?
Metropolitan Police [19]	30	0	0	30	No
Department for Education [20]	26	0	0	26	Yes
Deloitte [21]	26	0	0	26	Yes
Linklaters [22]	26	0	0	26	No (12 weeks offered to partners at full pay)
Natwest [23]	24	0	0	24	Yes
NHS [24]	8	0	18	26	No
Burgundy Book [17]	4	2	12	18	No

Improving maternity pay entitlements in education to match these sectors would be a step forward. However, introducing a national policy of equal parental leave for educators would be an even more significant victory.

In an industry grappling with recruitment and retention challenges, such a policy could attract more prospective fathers to the profession and help retain the mothers we are currently losing. By offering family-friendly benefits, teaching could once again compete with the prestigious fields of law, banking, consultancy, re-establishing its reputation as a valued and respected career choice for new graduates and career changers alike.

"I had to go back much quicker than I would have liked after maternity leave because my mat pay was so rubbish. It made me really angry to be honest"

Secondary classroom teacher - left in 2022 with 11 years experience

Recommendation 5: The Burgundy Book should be updated to adopt equal and improved parental leave policies. This update should match the 26 weeks of fully paid parental leave enjoyed by colleagues working at the Department for Education (DfE), supporting both men and women in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Current shared parental leave and maternity leave policies in the UK often reinforce traditional social norms in parenting, placing a disproportionate burden on mothers that persists once they re-enter the workforce. While we recognize that this change will be gradual, given that equal parental leave is not yet widespread across the UK, we must take the first steps now, especially in light of the pressing retention and recruitment challenges we face in our schools. Our ultimate goal is for all schools to offer equal parental leave. To begin this journey, we propose a pilot program supported by comprehensive training for school leaders and HR departments. This approach will ensure a smooth transition and drive the cultural change necessary for a more equitable and inclusive educational environment.

Teacher recruitment adverts in England have tended to focus on the moral purpose of teaching. But if we want to truly improve recruitment and retention, the education sector must move beyond this notion of teaching as martyrdom. Instead, recruitment campaigns should present teaching as a profession that supports a balanced life outside the classroom. Reach Academy in Feltham exemplifies this shift in their recent adverts.[25] [26] They have made deliberate choices to depict not only the impactful work teachers do with their students but also their ability to enjoy personal time with their families after school hours. This approach highlights a more sustainable and appealing vision of the teaching profession.

Recommendation 6: Our recruitment campaigns must also move beyond traditional narratives such as "do it for the kids" or "go above and beyond." Instead, they should highlight examples of teachers and leaders who balance their careers with family life, showcasing diverse role models to illustrate this achievable balance. Emphasising that schools are committed to enabling both professional and personal success is crucial. By presenting teaching as a sustainable and desirable career, we can attract a broader range of candidates and support our goal of gender parity in leadership.

4

Schools embrace flexibility as a solution to a problem, rather than a problem to be solved

Too few schools offer flexible working to their staff. Too many teachers, especially women, and especially mothers leave because they are not able to fit a career in teaching around their personal responsibilities.

Flexible working is also still used as a way to enable women to meet the expectation to take on the majority of domestic and caring responsibilities in our societies, as well as balance demanding careers, without this same expectation placed on men. If flexible working is to be used to address the motherhood penalty highlighted in this report, we need to see equal rates of uptake amongst men as amongst women.

Good work is already being done by the Flexible Working Ambassador Schools and MATs programme, but evolutions are needed in response to the insights provided over the last four years.

Recommendation 7: Introduce Flexible Working Champions in the 1,000 schools that need them most by the end of this parliament. Without dedicated personnel, supported through a TLR3 payment, responsible for implementing flexible working policies, meaningful change is unlikely. This should be funded direct from government for eligible schools. Evaluation should be baked into this from the start to refine the programme further before gradually rolling out to more schools for a period of two years.

Our research indicates that the role of the timetabler is crucial to embedding flexible working.

“My new school has got a complete wizard of a timetabling person who's done it for years and can make the days work for what you can request - that's unheard of in most places.”

Secondary middle leader

“I requested one afternoon a week to do my lesson planning at home and one late start so I could take my kids to nursery and I just got told - computer says no - sorry.”

Secondary classroom teacher

The technology to facilitate this already exists, but most schools utilise less than 10% of its functionality.[27] Some schools still rely on outdated methods, such as moving post-it notes around a whiteboard, rather than using software to create optimised timetables.

To move forward, schools need the resources, capabilities and support to fully leverage available technology and make flexible working a practical, widespread reality. Again, there is significant expertise in Flexible Working Ambassador Schools and in multi-academy trusts that could be leveraged much more systematically than at present. This approach will not only improve retention but also the wellbeing of staff who will feel more valued averting the knock on effects on mental health of poor timetable design. A skilled timetabler can not only integrate flexibility for staff, but also optimise for other considerations, such as minimising classroom moves for teachers or students. Additionally, for instance they could ensure that the intensity of the week is more evenly distributed, by not scheduling all the most challenging classes for a teacher consecutively in a day whenever possible.

Recommendation 8: With partners in the sector design and implement an accredited fully funded CPD course focusing on the change management and practical skills needed to create a more flexible and enduring teaching career. This programme should include training in areas such as timetabling, strategic planning, and fostering a supportive school culture to ensure long-term success. This should be funded from the £270 million a year extra the Labour party pledged to spend on professional development for teachers in their 2024 manifesto.

Every school is unique, and each is at a different stage on the path toward embracing flexibility. Proposing a one-size-fits-all approach to flexibility isn't genuine flexibility. However, we must ensure that more schools offer flexible working options and provide robust support to make this possible.

For some schools, this might mean writing 1.5 flexible days into teachers' contracts, allowing them to attend events like Glastonbury or their child's nativity play. For others, it could mean adopting a nine-day fortnight, or scheduling form time in the middle of the day to accommodate late starts.

To achieve this, we need to do much more to dismantle the barriers and dispel the myths surrounding flexible working. There are numerous successful case studies that the Secretary of State and the Department for Education should actively highlight.

But the current data on what schools are implementing is incomplete and inconsistent. The Department for Education should conduct a comprehensive review of all centrally collected data, before streamlining this data collection process for schools, and explore options for incorporating flexible working practices into this approach.

Recommendation 9: We also propose that the Department for Education require all timetabling software providers in the UK to sign up to uniform data standards so that we can build a comprehensive knowledge base of best practices and innovations in flexible working and workload management.

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10. Metropolitan Police Service (2019) [Leading practice: A guide to effective leadership and management in the Metropolitan Police Service](#)
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18. EPM (2023) [Burgundy Book updated for the first time in over two decades](#)
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25. Reach Teacher Training (2024a). [Recruitment video highlighting teacher work-life balance](#)
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27. Pendo (2024) [MTP benchmarks](#)

Figure 15: Proportion of teachers in the state sector in England with a child under 19

Age group	Male	Female	Total
20-24	14%	16%	16%
25-29	15%	18%	17%
30-34	47%	57%	54%
35-39	71%	77%	75%
40-44	71%	82%	79%
45-49	74%	71%	72%
50-54	51%	38%	41%
55-59	26%	12%	15%
60-64	14%	2%	5%

With thanks to Jack Worth and colleagues at the NFER for doing this analysis

Source: NFER (2024) Analysis of Labour Force Survey data 2010-2023 by the National Foundation for Educational Research