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TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION – A FEW COMMENTS FROM UCAC

We welcome the fact that the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee is investigating 'Teacher Recruitment and Retention'. Our comments follow the subheadings suggested on the Senedd Cymru website.

BACKGROUND

The challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers in Wales is not a new one; indeed, it is a challenge facing other countries in the United Kingdom as well. However, we have to face the fact that Wales faces an additional challenge, as it also has to consider the need for a bilingual workforce, especially considering the vision and goal of achieving one million Welsh speakers and the aspirations of the Welsh Language and Education Bill.

There have been a number of initiatives to increase the numbers starting a teaching career, and the Government claims, according to the words of Lynne Neagle in Senedd Plenary on 22 January 2025, that they are doing 'lots and lots and lots of work' ¹ in terms of recruiting and retaining teachers. However, despite the work, the problem still remains, so it must be questioned whether the efforts and action have been channeled in the right direction.

BARRIERS TO RECRUITMENT

Teachers' working conditions - one of the main obstacles to attracting more teachers to the profession is working conditions. Issues such as workload, pupils' behaviour, working hours, class sizes, and parents' attitudes all contribute to the problem. The clear evidence from our members is that these issues have worsened in recent years, which therefore have a negative impact on teacher recruitment. It is very disappointing that the Government has not in this regard addressed the recommendations of the IWPRB Strategic Review, which was commissioned in December 2021 and published in April 2024. Similarly, the Government is very slow

¹ Transcript of Senedd Plenary (paragraph 135) 22 January 2025

in addressing the working conditions recommendations in recent IWPRB annual reports.

School funding (cuts) - There is a very close link between an increase in workload and school funding. With funding cuts in schools, classes are increasing in size, and there are fewer resources, including fewer human resources. The increased burden is borne by fewer individuals. Not only are larger classes more challenging to teach, but the marking work is increasingly demanding too, so teachers' workload becomes more burdensome both within and outside the class. In recent years, we have seen schools having to cut staff – indeed, very few schools haven't faced financial challenges, and therefore the pressure is greater on the remaining teachers.

Lack of job flexibility - Young people today are faced with a job market that generally offers quite a bit of flexibility in terms of work arrangements – issues such as remote working, flexible hours etc. In surveys, 'flexibility' appears very high in what young people are seeking when looking for a job. 'Working from home' has now become very common. Indeed, lack of flexibility in the education profession has been increasingly highlighted as other jobs have become more flexible, due to Covid. Teaching does not offer the flexibility to be able to attend important family events, and it limits the ability to attend leisure activities of choice. As a result, many consider that the profession restricts too much upon their freedom to do what they want to do at times of their choice and choose to follow a profession that will offer better flexibility and a better balance in terms of leisure/family life and work. Again, the Government is aware of the situation, and discussions have been held with IWPRB, but nothing has changed.

More appealing jobs – Degrees/studies in certain fields open doors to jobs that pay extremely well and where the working conditions are favourable. A teacher's job needs to be appealing – offering good working conditions and paying well. Another issue that makes a job appealing is a specific pathway, with steps and milestones that lead to definitive development. This is not true in education. Not only should support and opportunities for promotion/development be offered on the job, but support is also needed for prospective teachers throughout their training pathway.

It would be a good idea to target school pupils and students early on and encourage them to pursue a career in education, identifying the benefits of pursuing a career in this field and giving opportunities for older pupils in schools to gain teaching and training skills. Bearing in mind that there is a shortage of teachers in some subjects, how about trying to encourage pupils to consider specific A Level subjects, if they have ability and interest in those subjects, drawing their attention to the value of those subjects for pursuing a career in the future. It is key that a teacher sees their work in a positive way in order to be able to share a positive message with pupils. Unfortunately, due to workload and working conditions they are often not in a position to do so.

Location – It is important that postgraduate teacher training courses are in settings attached to institutions that offer first degrees. The fact that there is now no teacher training course in Aberystwyth can affect the numbers that will choose to follow teacher training courses. Every university in Wales should have a postgraduate course for teacher training.

FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHER RETENTION IN THE PROFESSION

Pupil behaviour – Increasing problems in terms of keeping pupils and parents in order show a general lack of respect for teachers. The result of this is that teachers lose heart. Spending hours preparing appears to be a 'waste' if pupils do not show respect and if a large percentage of a lesson is spent getting children in order.

Violent, serious incidents in schools - A number of teachers are now talking about feeling threatened when going to school and we are all horrified when we think about what happened at Ysgol Dyffryn Aman. Unfortunately, examples of violent incidents are on the rise, and these problems are no longer limited to big cities, in specific areas. Recent events have shown that serious incidents can happen anywhere.

Parents' attitudes – Not only have pupils' attitudes changed in recent years (especially worsening since Covid), but teachers also note that parents' attitudes have deteriorated significantly. Parents challenge schools' decisions in relation to disciplining children, questioning rules, and refusing to work with schools. Their behaviour can be challenging and threatening at times, appearing in schools without warning and showing a lack of respect for school staff.

Workload - Having to work for long hours every day – preparing, marking, and doing administrative work, is causing individuals to leave the profession. Definitive boundaries need to be set for teachers' working hours, ensuring that there is real value to any administrative task etc. Excessive workload has a serious impact on teachers. It places unacceptable stress on them and affects their perception of teaching as a career, and also affects the perception of prospective teachers as to the nature of the job. According to a former teacher in an article in Y Cymro, 'The nature of a teacher's job leads to overwhelming weariness and exhaustion. Working three jobs to pay the rent, after leaving the teaching profession, was much easier for me than being a teacher.'²

Again, there is government recognition that there are challenges in the field - but there has been very little action to improve the situation in recent years.

Constant reforms in education, meaning extra pressure on teachers – Over the past few years, teachers have had to cope with a new curriculum, new qualifications (GCSE), and a new ALN Act, let alone other changes within schools. These changes have meant a load of work for teachers and there is a risk that teachers are being taken for granted. They are expected to find time to undertake online training

² Y Cymro, July 7 2024 page 4

for new courses, read new specifications, and prepare materials for new courses. All this is happening within a context of fiscal cuts, redundancies and huge social challenges.

Lack of support for teachers – The profession feels at times that there is no support for them and that learners, parents and society are very negative and critical. Qualifications Wales' comments in delaying the introduction of the new GCSEs did not paint a positive picture of the profession. It was a disappointment for teachers to read Qualifications Wales' comments at the time, namely that the reason for the delay was teachers' 'lack of confidence' to deliver the course. Teachers felt that the impression was given that teachers were to blame for the delay and that there was a fault on their part. There can also be considerable pressure on teachers from Estyn, the consortia and local authorities. It must also be acknowledged that these people can support teachers and there are some good examples of this.

Demands are constantly changing – teachers have now developed into being social workers, parents, health and safety experts, counsellors etc etc. Teachers feel unable to focus on teaching. One example of this is the increasing demand on primary school teachers to change children's nappies. Parents feel that it is the role of teachers to teach their children everything – including the basic skills that parents should introduce and teach.

SCHOOL LEADERS

Some specific factors that affect the recruitment and retention of school leaders

Workload/Demands – Unfortunately, there is no limit to the hours that leaders are expected to work. Teachers, parents, social services and the police expect school leaders to be available at all hours of the day, all year round.

Again, discussions and consultation in this regard have dragged on for several years, without any change to the situation.

Various job responsibilities/Expectations – Headteachers are expected to be experts on all kinds of aspects of school life – such as health and safety, and social work. As problems increase in society, schools are under increasing pressure. UCAC welcomes any steps taken to make schools safer places, but regrets the additional pressure and increased accountability placed on school leaders. Due to the decline in behaviour and the risk of violent incidents, all schools in some counties are required to develop their own safeguarding plans and schedule training drills. The effectiveness of the documents and guidance will need to be tested. As a result of this, documents may need to be amended. Schools are asked to review their plan every year or more often if there are important changes, e.g. key staff. Schools will need to keep a central register of the arrangements, note the date of serious incident training drills and the date on which the action plan was reviewed. The intention is commendable but it is an additional strain on individuals that are already under great

pressure. There is clear need for the Government to offer clear guidance in this regard.

Liability – There is profound pressure on leaders, as they are accountable to learners, parents, staff, local authorities, consortia, and Estyn. These pressures have led to mental illness for many leaders or have discouraged them to such an extent that they leave the profession, in order to achieve better work/life balance.

Financial cuts – Heads usually have to lead the process of deciding on ways of saving money. This puts a lot of pressure on their shoulders, especially when there have to be cuts to staff etc. Having to face difficult decisions, such as making redundancies amongst staff (who are colleagues) in order to balance the budget puts enormous stress on individuals. It is a decision that people do not want to face and as a result they settle for lower salaries, staying in an ordinary teacher's job.

WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

The majority of the education workforce, like the majority of the population of Wales, is white. It is important that any individual from an ethnic minority is welcomed into the profession and that they do not face any racial prejudice.

80% of Welsh teachers belong to the 'white' category, with 13% not specifying their nationality, so only 7% of teachers are from an ethnic background.³ It must be remembered that 93.8% of the population of Wales is 'white'⁴, but we welcome any initiative to encourage more individuals from ethnic minorities to join the profession, in order to have a diverse and inclusive workforce.

75.6% of the workforce are women and only 24.4% are men⁵. This is not a fair reflection of society and having diversity in terms of female/male teachers is beneficial for learners of all ages.

It is crucial that as many teachers as possible in Wales speak Welsh and are able to teach through the medium of both Welsh and English. Currently 33% of teachers in Wales state that they can speak Welsh, and 26.5% state that they can teach through the medium of Welsh. Bearing in mind the aspirations of the Welsh Language and Education Bill, it is important that more and more teachers are trained that can speak Welsh and teach through the medium of the language.

In order to have more Welsh speakers, more Welsh education is needed, and in order to have more Welsh education, more teachers are needed that who can work through the medium of Welsh. Ensuring this means tackling it seriously. The Welsh in education workforce plan was produced in 2022, which includes some ideas to tackle the problem. However, I wonder how much proactive work is being done to

³ As above

⁴ <https://www.gov.wales/ethnic-group-national-identity-language-and-religion-wales-census-2021-html>

⁵ Annual Statistics for the Education Workforce in Wales 2024 (EWC)

attract Welsh-medium teachers, and I wonder how much real evaluation and monitoring is there regarding the 2022 plan? There are great examples of people who have tackled the challenge of learning Welsh and teaching through the medium of Welsh. More use needs to be made of these excellent examples in order to encourage more to follow their example. It is key that the Government fully considers the practice in other countries, where there is clear recognition that being able to teach in two languages is a valuable additional skill, e.g. New Zealand and Ireland, in this regard as well.

SO WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE ISSUES OUTLINED ABOVE?

THE IMPACT ON LEARNERS

Lack of continuity and consistency – The shortage of teachers in our schools and high numbers of teachers leaving the profession mean that there is no continuity and consistency for pupils in certain subjects or at certain stages of their education. A lack of consistency can have a negative effect on pupils' standards of achievement.

Reduced subject expertise – With fewer teachers in our schools, what often happens is that teachers have to teach subjects in which they are not experts. This can lead to inferior education in some subjects, leading in some cases to fewer studying certain subjects as their teachers have not shown the same expertise and enthusiasm towards those subjects.

Fewer teachers – Fewer teachers mean larger classes, and in such classes, individuals receive less attention and there is a risk of a drop in standards as a result.

IMPACT ON DELIVERING EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

The latest reforms to 14-16 courses offer a wider range of subjects, but without the teachers to deliver these subjects, the choice will shrink.

Fewer teachers will mean an increased workload and therefore less time to prepare for the introduction of new educational reforms

IMPACT ON TEACHERS AND THE WIDER WORKFORCE

As has already been mentioned, the situation is critical, as more and more pressure is placed on the teachers that remain in the profession. The current critical situation is likely to worsen the situation further.

ADDRESSING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

It appears that some of the plans that have been presented in recent years are ad hoc responses, rather than being carefully planned. There are examples of people

following training courses to become teachers in order to obtain a grant/bursary and then follow a career in another area. It must be ensured that there is coherent thinking in this regard, with a link between training, recruitment and retention. The profession must be marketed and promoted, giving careful attention and consideration to when students decide on their career path, in order to be able to positively influence their choice. There must be collaboration with careers officers, taking into account the importance of different times e.g. Year 9 (choosing subjects), Year 11 (choosing A level subjects), the time when students are considering options after graduation etc.

There must be collaboration with those that are offering teacher training courses and ensure that there are opportunities on those courses to immerse students in the Welsh language. Some Welsh training should be included on all ITT courses in Wales, so that everyone trained in Wales has some grasp of the language.

Why not enable students to follow an academic route and a route in education, and start teaching part time, while they follow further academic courses?

If money is given to attract people to join the profession, the career of those teachers that have benefited from these recruitment schemes must be tracked, ensuring that the money is spent on people that stay in the profession and show enthusiasm and commitment. The risk is that people receive the money but do not stay in the profession or certainly do not stay in the profession long enough.

New teachers need the security of firm support and high-quality mentoring. There has been a tendency for mentoring schemes to be a box-ticking exercise, rather than schemes that offer firm, sustaining support.

We again note how important it is to address workload effectively in order to ensure that there is a positive attitude amongst the current workforce.

It must be seen that the Government is listening to teachers and addressing the existing problems. Providing a toolkit is not the answer to everything. Jeremy Miles noted in the Welsh in Education Workforce Plan in 2022 that 'radical and innovative' action is needed.⁶

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the situation is critical and that the problem needs to be tackled. This is not an easy issue, but somehow something needs to be done about workload, well-being, flexible working and career portfolio. The well-being of pupils and teachers is at stake. We are in danger of losing good, conscientious teachers, who would have a positive influence on pupils. More teachers need to be attracted and ensure that they have enough time to prepare and mark/assess within a certain time, and that they get the due respect from learners and parents.

⁶ Welsh in education workforce plan (Welsh Government - 2022)

Bearing in mind Nelson Mandela's words that education is the 'most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world', we need to ensure that we have the necessary workforce to ensure a prosperous future for the children and young people of Wales.