

# Subject Shortages in Scottish Secondary Education

## Introduction

The shortage of qualified teachers in Scotland's secondary schools continues to be a significant concern, impacting staffing levels, curriculum provision, and ultimately student attainment. A recent survey of Scottish secondary school leaders, who are SLS members, highlights the extent of the problem across the country.

## Survey Overview

The survey gathered responses from 147 Scottish secondary schools, representing 31 out of 32 Local Authorities, as well as the independent sector. The findings reveal an ongoing struggle to maintain staffing levels:

- Average teaching vacancies per school:
  - **1.58 FTE** unprompted teaching vacancies
  - **1.76 FTE** total vacancies, including promoted and unpromoted positions.
- Support staff shortages: Nearly one staff member short per school. This includes classroom support staff, ASN support staff, technicians, office and admin staff and others in an important support role in schools.

Schools begin each day with an **average shortfall of almost 3 staff**, even before factoring in long-term absences, short-term absences, emergency dental and medical appointments, etc.

## Cover requirements:

- These average staff shortages result an average of 38 periods of class cover required, in a situation where supply teachers are thin on the ground at best, and non-existent in many areas.
- As an aside, the proposed **additional 90-minute non-class contact** could mean **two extra periods per week** per teacher and in a school of 1,350 pupils would require **7.4 FTE** (mostly part-time teachers in a variety of subjects to cover these periods).

## Subject-Specific Shortages

Some subjects are disproportionately affected by vacancies:

- Mathematics: 23.5% of vacancies
- Technical subjects (CDT, Design and Manufacture, DET): 14.7%
- English: 11.7%
- English & Maths combined: 35.2% – which significantly affects attainment, given their importance in national education metrics.
- Science: 7.8%
- Business & Computing: 10%
- Computing: A long-standing shortage has led to curriculum cuts in 11% of secondary schools.
- There is also a dire shortage of Gaelic medium Maths and science teachers.

## Geographical Disparities

Teacher shortages are more pronounced outside Scotland's central belt:

- Grampian region: 23.4% of vacancies
- Tayside & Fife: 17%
- Highlands & Islands: 12%
- More than half (56%) of vacancies occur outside the central belt, despite the majority of Scotland's population residing there.
- Interestingly, Tayside and Fife have more vacancies than the 8 local authorities around and including Glasgow (West Partnership), despite this area including three of Scotland's five most populous areas.

## Impact on Curriculum

While **63% of schools** reported no changes to their curriculum, over one third of Scottish secondary schools have had to adjust their curriculum offer due to staff shortages:

- Computing:
  - Removed from the curriculum in 20 schools.
  - National 4/5 Computing being taught by dual-qualified non-specialist in some cases.
  - Additional computing subjects such as Cyber Security cut in several schools
- Technical Subjects (CDT): Cut in 9 schools.
- Home Economics & HE-related subjects: Cut entirely in 8 schools, with additional reductions in S1/S2 rotations in 7 other schools.
- Languages: French, German, Spanish, and Mandarin limited in 9 schools
- Business Studies (including Economics & Accounting): Cut in 6 schools.
- Other affected subjects: Music Technology, Media, Physics, and Modern Studies have been removed from or considerably reduced in a number of individual schools.
- Gaelic medium schools are also under pressure.
- Mathematics: Reduced teaching periods in two schools, plus in one school within the BGE they now offer Numeracy, which is being taught by Science department.
- Broad General Education (BGE) and Senior Phase:
  - Undoubtedly reduced curricular offer due to staffing shortages
  - Schools utilising primary-qualified teachers in Mathematics and English to support S1/S2 due to recruitment challenges in these core subjects.

## Subjects Significantly Reduced Due to Staff Shortages

A number of schools have had to reduce specific subjects by more than 50% due to ongoing vacancies:

- CDT (Technical subjects): 24.5% (36 out of 147 schools)
- Home Economics: 20.4% (30 out of 147 schools)
- Computing: 8.2% (12 out of 147 schools)
- Languages (French, German, Spanish, Mandarin): 6.1% (9 out of 147 schools)

- Business Subjects (Economics, Accounting, etc.): 4.8% (7 out of 147 schools)
- Drama: 2.7% (4 out of 147 schools)
- Physics: 2.0% (3 out of 147 schools)
- Mathematics: 2.7% (4 out of 147 schools)

These reductions further highlight the impact on curriculum breadth, limiting student opportunities in both vocational and core academic subjects.

### **Impact of Teacher Shortages on Student Performance**

Teacher shortages have a direct and serious impact on young people's education:

- Larger class sizes and reduced individual attention – Fewer teachers can result in bigger classes, reducing opportunities for individual support.
- Lower academic achievement – Limited subject coverage can affect exam performance, particularly in core subjects like Mathematics and English.
- Increased use of temporary supply staff – Schools resort to supply staff who are not qualified in the shortage subject or primary-qualified teachers, which can impact on the quality of learning and teaching.
- Limited curricular offer – Computing, Home Economics, Business Studies, Physics, and Modern Studies are among subjects removed from some schools, limiting student options.
- Teacher burnout & reduced engagement – Increased workload for teachers covering shortages leads to burnout, affecting classroom energy and student motivation.
- Disparities in education quality – Rural and disadvantaged areas tend to suffer more from staffing shortages, thus widening the attainment gap.

### **Effective Strategies to Address Teacher Shortages**

There are several approaches that can help alleviate staffing challenges:

- Improving teacher salaries & conditions – The need to ensure the profession is more attractive to young graduates. There is a need to look at the support given to it in succeeding years so there is a supported structure for all teachers, not just those in their probationary year. Flexible working condition, and a review of the TIS would help.
- GTCS Registration – reviewing the GTCS categories for registration and/or supporting teachers with advice and guidance on how to add additional categories to their registration.
- Technology and online – Online learning solutions can supplement in-person teaching, especially in geographically remote regions.
- Promoting diversity and inclusion in recruiting teachers – Expanding recruitment efforts can increase the available talent pool.
- Reducing workload and stress – Reducing workload pressure and offering mental health support improves teacher satisfaction and longevity in the profession.
- Scottish Government & CoSLA interventions – Increased education funding to ensure staffing levels.

## **Conclusion**

Scotland's teacher shortage is severely impacting school staffing levels, curriculum offer, pupil attainment. Mathematics and English are disproportionately affected, and rural areas suffer the most vacancies. While some schools have adapted, many face reduced course options, increased class sizes, and reliance on temporary staff, if they can be found. Addressing these challenges requires urgent intervention through improved recruitment, better retention strategies, and policy support.