



Department
for Education

Transitioning from primary to secondary teaching

Research report

September 2024

Department for Education



Government
Social Research

Contents

Overview	2
Survey findings	3
Interview findings	4
Differences between primary and secondary	4
Barriers and attractions to moving to secondary	4
Potential roles of interest in secondary	5
Training or guidance that could support a move to secondary	6
What would encourage teachers to switch	6

Overview

Anyone who holds Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) can teach in either primary or secondary schools, and teachers move between phases each year. The Department wanted to understand more about the level of interest in teaching in secondary settings from primary teachers.

Primary teachers were asked in the June 2022 School and College Panel survey about their overall interest in switching between phases. The School and College Panel is a panel of leaders and teachers designed to provide rapid feedback to the Department for Education on topical educational issues from the provider perspective. Further details on methodology can be found in survey technical report.

To further explore their responses, 45-60 minute qualitative depth interviews were conducted with 20 primary teachers from the survey panel. Invitations to participate in the research were deliberately targeted towards those who said they would or might consider teaching secondary in the survey, but were otherwise a cross-section of teachers in terms of teaching experience, Key Stage and subject specialism.

This report summarises the findings from the survey questions and the qualitative depth interviews. This research report was written before the new UK government took office on 5 July 2024. As a result, the content may not reflect current government policy.

Survey findings

Primary teachers were asked whether, if they were supported to do so, they would consider teaching in a secondary school at some point in their career – 19% said they would, 22% said they might consider it and 60% said they would not consider it. When asked if they would consider such a move in the next three years, 12% said they would, 18% said they might whilst 70% said they would not.

Interview findings

Whilst a minority of teachers reported that they would consider teaching at secondary school in the survey, the qualitative interviews showed that many were not confident or enthused about making the transition. Teachers who were potentially interested in teaching in secondary school reported many barriers (see below).

Despite these barriers, most interviewees felt that vacancies would be available to them in secondary school if they wanted to make the move. Some mentioned that it would be beneficial for job advertisements to explicitly reference being open to primary school applicants.

Differences between primary and secondary

Regardless of whether they had taught at secondary schools before, most interviewees felt that secondary schools were very different, with participants using language such as 'us and them' to discuss primary and secondary teachers respectively.

There was an expectation among primary teachers that the secondary school culture would be different. Teachers felt that secondary schools were more formal, with different student attitudes, relationships and safety concerns, which all acted as barriers to potential switching.

A move to secondary school was considered more than just a phase move. External factors such as moving schools, learning to work with new colleagues and potentially new locations were brought up as concerns. This was alongside phase-specific concerns, such as behaviour and subject specialism.

Barriers and attractions to moving to secondary

The main barriers to teaching in secondary school included a lack of subject knowledge, concerns about managing more challenging behaviour among pupils, exam pressures and a change in their relationship with pupils. A perceived reduction in workload and a better work life balance was seen as a potential attraction for some teachers.

Many primary teachers interviewed felt they would need a considerable depth of knowledge in a specific subject to teach in secondary and were concerned they either did not have the depth of knowledge required, or the passion to want to teach only one subject.

Most felt that they would not be respected, and that students were less willing to learn. The difference in size of schools between phases meant some teachers interviewed were

concerned about not being able to follow-up with children to see whether safeguarding issues had been dealt with.

Interviewees were concerned about the personal impact of teaching exam years (e.g., GCSE or A-Levels) as these results stay with students for life. Some also felt that the set-up of exam boards and systems in secondary was unfamiliar and worked very differently to exams in primary schools.

Having many students for a few hours each week, rather than teaching one class, was a concern for many primary teachers interviewed. Most found following the journey of their pupils a rewarding part of their job in primary and felt this would not be the same in secondary.

Workload

Some thought it might be easier to achieve a better work-life balance in secondary, as they felt secondary teachers have more non-contact time for lesson planning, marking, and other admin. They also felt that secondary teachers would be able to rely on repeating (or slightly modifying) lessons as they taught multiple classes, meaning that they had less preparation to do.

Potential roles of interest in secondary

The types of roles that primary teachers said they might be interested in if they were to move into a secondary school included pastoral roles, teaching transition years (Years 7-8) and teaching a subject where they had a particular interest.

Roles working with children with SEND, or in a more wellbeing- or social-orientated capacity, were thought to be a way to bring existing skills into a secondary school role. For others who still had interest in a classroom role, teaching wellbeing or social studies areas such as PSHE or RSE were also of interest.

Teaching transition years was of interest to some teachers interviewed, as they felt more could be done to support children in their transition from primary to secondary from a wellbeing perspective. Others felt more comfortable with the transition from Key Stage (KS) 2 to KS3, rather than KS4 or KS5.

Those with a degree background in a subject, or a subject lead in primary, felt they may be comfortable teaching this at a KS3 level. Some interviewees felt that would be best suited to teaching a subject they teach daily. Others felt moving into a non-academic, practical subject could be better.

Training or guidance that could support a move to secondary

For those who would at least consider changing phases, placement or shadowing opportunities, subject knowledge or behaviour training and mentoring might support a move to secondary.

Most teachers interviewed reported that a placement opportunity to receive real life exposure to what being a secondary teacher is like, with a mentor or through shadowing, was the best method to learn more about secondary schools and feel supported.

Interviewees suggested that training specifically designed to enhance their subject knowledge in the area they would teach at secondary would be beneficial. This also linked to wanting to understand more about the curriculum to feel more confident.

Training designed to help primary teachers develop strategies for behaviour management in secondary school classrooms were suggested.

Some also noted that support from a mentor or buddy during their first few years as a secondary teacher would be reassuring and would offer an opportunity for feedback on their performance.

As well as specific training, some teachers wanted more reassurance about the process of moving to secondary. They mentioned information or case studies on how to make the move, confirmation on whether they had the right qualifications to move to secondary, and on the experiences of others would be beneficial.

What would encourage teachers to switch

Guaranteed teaching hours, more money, leadership opportunities and a guarantee that they would only teach transition years would help some teachers move to secondary. However, others felt that there was nothing that would motivate them to move from their current role to secondary school teaching.

Financial drivers were most widely cited as potential enablers. A 'sign-on bonus', salary increase, or a bursary or sponsorship for training were all noted as potential financial motivators for making the switch. However, this was not universal: some teachers reported that these incentives would not motivate them.



Department
for Education

© Department for Education copyright 2024

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Reference: RR1448

ISBN: 978-1-83870-574-9

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact www.education.gov.uk/contactus.

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications.