

Crisis at the chalkface



Teacher shortages are hitting Catholic schools hard, with some unable to recruit for long periods. Dorothy Lepkowska examines the problem and discovers one solution that may be paying dividends

The current crisis in teacher recruitment and retention in schools is a nationwide problem; the Government has failed to hit the recruitment levels for teacher training for the fifth year in a row and there is a shortage of trainee teachers in a number of subjects including maths, physics, design and technology, and computing. In Scotland, where the staff shortage in Catholic schools has been described as “acute”, teachers from Ireland are being targeted to fill the gaps.

The numbers leaving the sector have added to the pressures. Almost a third of the 24,100 newly qualified teachers who started jobs in English state schools in 2010 have left, according to Schools Minister Nick Gibb. The Government said teacher retention had been broadly stable for 20 years but education specialists warn that it is laying the foundations for a disastrous teaching shortage in years to come. Economics, concerns over discipline and burn-out among existing staff are some of the factors behind the poor retention rates.

For Catholic schools, there is an additional challenge. While teachers up to the level of assistant head do not need to be practising Catholics to teach in a Catholic school, they do need to be supportive and encouraging of the ethos. But senior leaders are expected to practise their faith, a requirement that can exacerbate the recruitment problem.

At the time of writing, there were 235 jobs advertised in Catholic schools in the United Kingdom in the TES (Times Educational Supplement), the foremost education newspaper in the country. Of these, 43 were senior leadership roles and 187 were in teaching and lecturing. Although it is not possible to identify how many are repeat advertisements for jobs, anecdotally we know that many will be.

Justin Gray, who trains teachers and master's students at Newman University and is deputy head at St Martin de Porres Catholic Primary School in Birmingham, blames a changing culture in teaching for part of the problem. He said many young people did not remain in teaching as a lifelong career and, for Catholic schools, this meant the loss of a sense of vocation.

“We are losing sight of what it means to be a Catholic teacher and what is distinctive about this,” he said. “It used to be about a dedication to Catholic education but young people who might consider teaching as a career now express and practise their faith in many different ways.”

Gray pointed out that without Catholic students coming forward to teach, there is a corresponding lack of Catholic teachers, adding: “We are increasingly finding that when teachers go on practice [work placement] to schools they are quickly snapped up when vacancies come up because the schools are already known to them and will have helped to train them.”

Increasingly, schools are “growing their own” teachers, which means they recruit and oversee trainees right from the beginning, with the expectation that they will stay on at the school. Some heads are even inviting sixth-formers into schools in the hope they will want to become teachers. “But too much of that poses a danger that you end up with an inertia and insularity with few or no candidates from outside to ensure that the school keeps evolving,” said Gray.

The acting head of a Bedfordshire Catholic primary school, who asked not to be named, said his school had had vacancies in Years 3 and 5 since September last year, and was still unable to fill them.

“Even if we had Catholic applicants, we would recruit the best teacher for the job, as long as they were in sympathy with the Catholic ethos. We put out an advert for teachers last term and no one even asked for an application pack, let alone applied.”

He said pressures on Catholic schools to employ candidates who were not of the faith were already having a knock-on effect on leadership. “I am an acting head, stepped up from deputy headship because the school couldn't recruit after two rounds of adverts,” he added. “It's a dire picture out there.”

The deputy head at a secondary school in the north-east of England told me that finding school leaders for Catholic schools was particularly difficult.

“Part of the problem is in complicated family lives,” she said. “Many professionals who would otherwise be excellent candidates are barred because of personal circumstances. For example, I know people who would be Catholic heads but cannot as they are divorced or married to a divorcee. I know divorced heads but as they remain married in the eyes of the Church, they cannot then meet and have a relationship with someone else without leaving their post. This is strictly policed by the diocese.”

Sue Cronin, head of the School of Teacher Education at Liverpool Hope University, believes the problems of recruitment to and retention at Catholic schools had to be set in the wider context, as Catholic schools were experiencing the same problems as all schools, notably with shortages in maths, some science subjects and computing and design technology.

However, Liverpool Hope is now working with a network of nine secondary schools known as the Wigan and West Lancashire Catholic School Direct, to help develop teachers and future leaders. The university has designed a bespoke programme to identify those who want to work in Catholic schools and who may be looking to develop their careers and take on leadership roles in the future.

“It is one solution to the problem of attracting beginning teachers and getting the right people into the profession,” she said. “The heads we have spoken to feel strongly that this is a successful route, and we are collectively trying to solve the problem. We have found that students often want to work in these schools because they see the ethos and faith dimensions as attractive and recognise the importance of these nurturing values.”

Sarah Holland, director of Wigan and West Lancashire Catholic School Direct, acknowledged the recruitment difficulties facing Catholic schools, but highlighted potential solutions. For the alliance, formed three years ago, this was “growing its own” teachers with a view to succession-planning for future leadership.

Since 2014, around 70 trainees have started the scheme, with almost half remaining to get full-time jobs in one of the nine schools on qualification.

“The partnership with Liverpool Hope has been a real success,” Holland said. “The trainees we have taken have fitted in well, and been hugely supportive of each other. The arrangement means that candidates can move around our schools when vacancies occur. We are creating a nurturing environment for people who see teaching as a lifelong career, and in turn they are realising what a great environment Catholic schools are to work in.”

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