

# A high-quality education profession

## Teaching

'Successful Futures' (Donaldson, 2015) identifies 12 pedagogical principles of good teaching and learning that schools need to consider as they decide how to realise the new Curriculum for Wales:

Figure 1: Good teaching and learning



(Estyn, 2018c, p.6)

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Where schools are successful in improving the quality of teaching and building teaching capacity for the future, they build a culture of collaboration and trust that encourages staff to evaluate their own practice honestly. They promote an ethos where teachers learn from each other and talk candidly about the strengths and areas for improvement in their own practice and that of their colleagues. In schools that are most successful, leaders encourage teachers to take reasonable risks and experiment with different approaches, while emphasising the impact of changes on outcomes for pupils. They ensure that the monitoring of the quality of teaching concentrates on how learners progress over time and do not make simplistic judgements about the quality of teaching by grading individual lessons. In weaker schools, leaders do not ensure a strategic approach to developing teaching and do not provide enough opportunities for staff to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of teaching at their school.

Many teachers, particularly in the primary sector, are becoming more reflective as they work with colleagues in their own school and in other schools to examine their professional practice. In a minority of schools, teachers engage with research evidence to inform their practice. Where this is most successful, they identify a specific need within their own practice or that of their school and access a wide range of research evidence to identify the most appropriate solution. In the best cases, they modify the suggested approach to fit the specific context of their school. However, in too many cases, schools engage with research at too superficial a level and do not focus on whether new approaches to teaching and pedagogy lead to improvements in standards or wellbeing for pupils.

The quality of teaching is good or better in around eight-in-ten non-maintained settings, around three-quarters of primary schools, and around half of secondary schools. These findings indicate an inconsistency of quality and of approaches to teaching as pupils move through the various phases of education. For example, in the most effective non-maintained settings, practitioners employ techniques to develop children's skills as independent learners. They implement foundation phase principles to ensure that children have opportunities to select resources, solve problems and develop collaborative working skills. In many primary schools, teachers build upon these skills, creating opportunities for pupils to reflect on the success of their learning and contribute their own ideas into lessons and topics. In many secondary schools, pupils receive more limited opportunities to develop their skills as reflective and independent learners. As pupils move into key stage 3, teaching does not often enough build on the achievements of pupils at the end of primary school, and teachers' expectations of pupils' ability are not high enough and tasks are not challenging enough, particularly for the more able.

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More schools are now using innovative ways to develop pupils' skills. This is particularly prevalent in the foundation phase, but becoming more evident in key stage 2 as well. For example, in a minority of schools, teachers weave literacy, numeracy and ICT skills through the curriculum using creative elements, such as dance, art and poetry. In a few cases, schools are working together to share expertise on how to use the expressive arts to develop pupils' skills. This is particularly the case in all-age schools and in clusters where secondary expertise in, for example, drama and art, is shared with primary colleagues.

Increasingly, teachers provide learners with opportunities to influence what and how they learn. In the best cases, pupils and staff collaborate on what they would like to learn to shape the themes the class will study. In a few primary schools, teachers work with pupils to identify the skills they will be learning and plan activities around these. However, use of assessment techniques to engage pupils in their learning and ensure that it builds well upon what pupils already know remains limited. In the secondary sector, these techniques, when used, are often ineffective, particularly the use of peer and self-assessment for tasks where pupils would benefit more from expert feedback from their teacher.

In the most effective schools, teachers take a strategic approach to giving feedback to pupils and do not feel the need to provide detailed written comments on every piece of work. Instead they prioritise aspects of pupils' work where written feedback would be most productive and balance this with other methods, such as verbal feedback that addresses common misconceptions among particular groups of pupils. In too many schools, feedback is not supporting pupils to improve their skills. Often, this is because teachers do not provide pupils with meaningful opportunities to respond to the feedback or practise the skills necessary to bring about the improvements.

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## Support staff

Support staff represent about half the school workforce. Around half of support staff are general teaching assistants, around two-in-ten are teaching assistants who support pupils with special educational needs, and the rest are employed in a variety of roles as shown in figure 2 below (StatsWales, 2019).



Just over three-quarters of teaching assistants are employed in primary schools, whereas special needs support assistants are more evenly employed across primary and secondary schools (StatsWales, 2019). The number of support staff with Higher Level Teaching Assistant status who are deployed in that role continues to grow (StatsWales, 2019).

Most schools deploy teaching assistants to support the progress of individuals and of groups of pupils. In many cases, teachers use these additional practitioners well to enhance foundation phase provision. In the best examples, these practitioners use their expertise to respond to pupils' needs and have a good awareness of when and how to intervene in pupils' learning. These interventions help to encourage the development of pupils' resilience and independence. However, often teaching assistants over-direct the work of pupils and this hinders their development as independent learners. In the best schools, teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to the ongoing assessment of pupils' progress and work productively with teachers to plan lessons and activities.

In most schools, leaders deploy teaching assistants to support the progress of pupils with special educational needs. In secondary schools this is the core role of most teaching assistants. In nearly all schools, this usually includes the delivery of intervention programmes to assist pupils with specific gaps in their skills or to support pupils with emotional and behavioural challenges. For example, in many primary schools, teaching

**Figure 2: Support staff in maintained schools in Wales, by category, 2018-2019**

**51%**

Teaching Assistants (a)

**20%**

Special needs support staff

**8%**

Higher Level Teaching Assistants

**14%**

Administration staff (b)

**3%**

Pastoral support staff

**4%**

Other support staff (c)

**(a) includes foreign language assistants**

**(b) includes examination officers, school business managers and other administration staff**

**(c) includes technicians, childcare, nurses, medical and library staff**

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assistants deliver speech and language support to younger pupils that enables them to make good progress with their communication skills. In many cases, schools use grant funding appropriately to provide additional teaching assistants to support the needs of vulnerable learners, although leaders generally do not evaluate the impact of this funding.

## Professional learning

Over the last few years, the Welsh Government has introduced strategies for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and for helping practitioners to develop their practice throughout their careers. The aim is to build capacity and to drive out variations in quality within and between schools. Current education reforms are based on a model of self-improvement and school-to-school working. This means that, in the most effective schools, leaders and teachers take responsibility for their own development and that of their peers. This self-improvement approach is school-led, and balanced by support from local authorities, regional consortia and the Welsh Government. Recently, professional learning is also becoming better informed by relevant research. The best school leaders look for evidence that proposed innovations are likely to have benefits for teachers and pupils and use existing research evidence and action research to inform decisions.

At best, professional learning is tailored to each school and is responsive to the needs of staff as individuals and groups. Professional learning is available for teachers at all career stages and supports teachers' development progressively. The culture of professional learning encourages and promotes a continuous cycle of improvement. Teachers and leaders use opportunities for professional learning to reflect on and develop their practice. These opportunities are revisited and evaluated to ensure that they have a positive impact on classroom practice. The least effective practice is where schools only invest substantially in professional learning at a specific stage of a teacher's career, such as entry into the profession or the early years of practice, or when teachers are in difficulty (Cordingley, 2013).

Where leadership of professional learning is effective, there is a clear focus on improving teaching and its impact on pupil progress. Other key areas that contribute to successful professional learning and pedagogy are:

- creating the right culture and conditions for professional learning
- building collaborative and supportive professional relationships within and between schools
- having an open classroom policy that encourages peer observation
- creating dedicated time for staff to engage with research evidence and carry out their own action research
- using data and new technologies as catalysts for improvement and innovation
- evaluating impact and effectiveness of the professional learning provision regularly within wider self-evaluation and improvement planning processes
- using professional development days as strategic opportunities to explore further initiatives in teaching and learning
- learning how to lead professional learning and staff development

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Strong leaders know their staff well and understand individual teachers' current level of practice and the next steps needed for their development. As a result of this underlying knowledge, a planned and bespoke approach to professional learning is possible, employing a range of different activities tailored to the individual's career pathway and improvement priorities. Teachers develop best when leaders enable them to "dare to experiment" through valuing those staff that take considered 'risks' (OECD, 2016, p.5). In these schools, leaders trust staff to make professional choices and encourage them to be open-minded. They support staff to approach their practice differently by taking problems as opportunities for learning. This encourages staff to think critically about their practice.

In effective schools, leaders place a high priority on professional learning for support staff. They provide opportunities for teaching assistants to observe good practice in their own and other schools. They facilitate the sharing of good practice, for example enabling staff with skills in 'green screen' technology to share these with colleagues. They ensure that effective performance review arrangements are in place to allow staff to reflect on their practice and work with leaders to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. In schools where leadership is most effective, leaders ensure that support staff play a full role in self-evaluation and improvement activities and actively consider their views. For example, in Cogan Primary School, teaching assistants engage in discussions with leaders, other teachers and pupils as an informal source of monitoring the school's provision and its impact on standards.

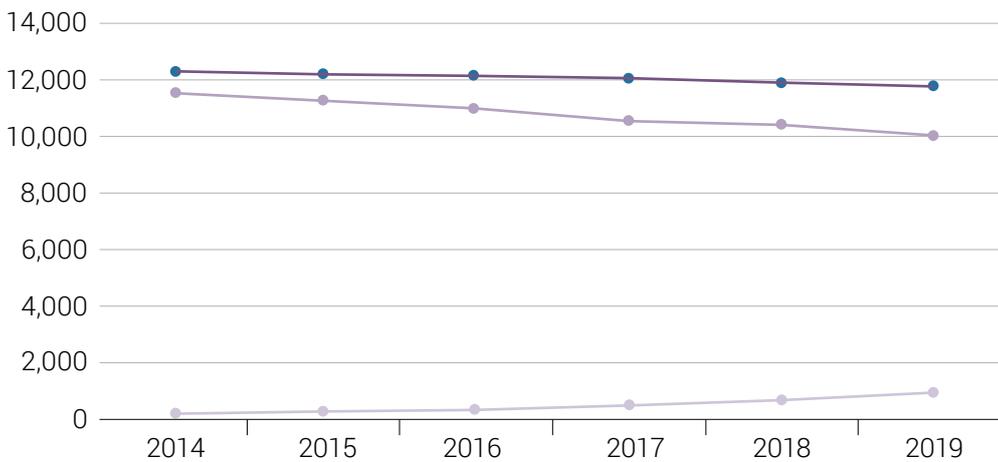
Where professional learning is less effective and does not have an impact on the school's work, there is often no strategic planning of professional learning activities. As a result, activities are often disjointed and not aligned to the school or the individual's improvement needs. In these cases, leaders do not use self-evaluation processes to identify the key aspects requiring support. In less effective schools, leaders take a blanket approach to professional learning regardless of individual need.

## Teacher recruitment and retention

Overall, teacher retention in Wales has remained stable over the past five years. Typically around 3% of teachers leave the profession each year (StatsWales, 2019n). The proportion of teachers remaining in teaching in Wales compares favourably with that of England, where the percentage of teachers leaving the profession has remained at around 10% a year over the same period (Department for Education, 2019).

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Even so, over the last five years, there has been a steady decline in the number of teachers in Wales. During the same period, until 2018, the number of pupils of primary school age increased while the numbers of secondary school age pupils decreased. Both trends reversed in 2019 (see figure 3 below).

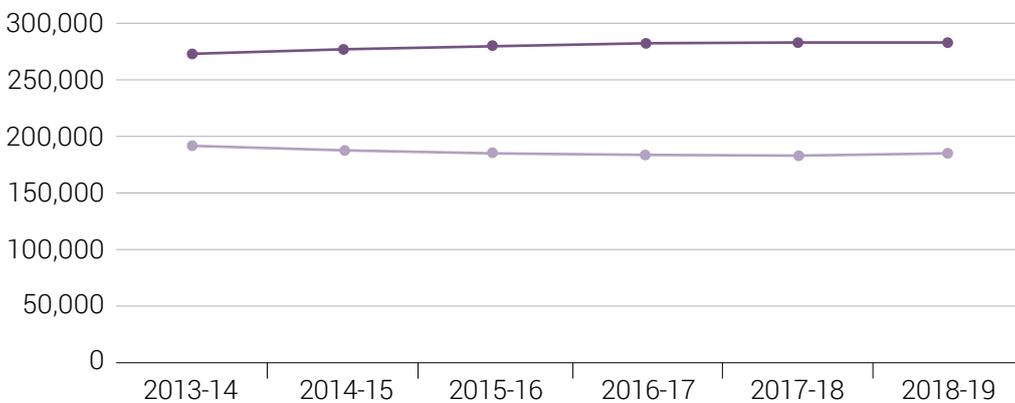


**Figure 3: Number of full-time equivalent qualified teachers in primary, secondary and all age schools in Wales, 2014 to 2019**

- Primary
- Secondary
- All-age

(StatsWales, 2019o)

Pupil numbers in secondary schools and the secondary phase of all-age schools are due to rise further over the next five years as higher numbers of pupils come through from primary schools (StatsWales, 2019k).



**Figure 4: Number of pupils in maintained schools in Wales, 2013-2014 to 2018-2019**

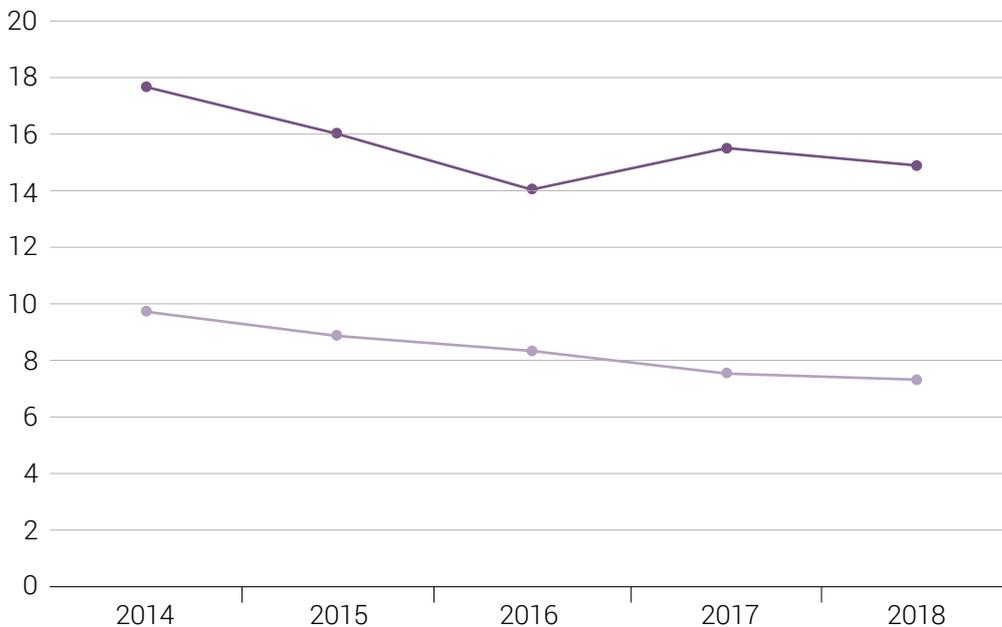
- Primary age pupils
- Secondary age pupils

(StatsWales, 2019k)

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There has been a drop in the number of students recruited to initial teacher education programmes in Wales as in other countries. Recruitment to primary programmes has decreased by around 10% in the last five years and that to secondary programmes has fallen by 40% over the same period (StatsWales, 2019d). Within this overall decline, several subjects have seen recruitment fall by 50% or more, including chemistry, ICT, mathematics, modern foreign languages, art and physics. The most recent figures for student teacher recruitment show that numbers have fallen again in around half of subjects (StatsWales, 2019e).

The number of teaching posts advertised in schools in Wales over the past few years has remained relatively stable (StatsWales, 2019m). The number of applications received by schools for the posts on offer has fallen overall (StatsWales, 2019m). There are, on average, just over twice as many applications for teaching posts in primary schools compared to secondary schools (StatsWales, 2019m). Over the last five years, in many secondary subjects, schools are receiving on average fewer than ten applications for each post (StatsWales, 2019m). A few subjects attract very low numbers of applicants. Over the last five years, an average of seven applications were received for each post advertised for biology, and five for chemistry and physics (StatsWales, 2019m).



**Figure 5: Average number of applications per teaching post in primary and secondary schools, 2014-2018**

Primary  
Secondary

These figures are for schools across Wales, and recruitment in Welsh-medium schools, rural schools, and schools in areas of high deprivation is more challenging (StatsWales, 2019m).

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## Initial teacher education

There is now, for the first time, a national approach to professional learning that aims at creating a structured model that will have impact on teaching, leadership and standards. This integrated approach that sees initial teacher education as the initial stage of career-long learning and development for teachers, and of establishing reflective practice from the outset, is welcome.

Initial teacher education has changed significantly in Wales, with new accreditation arrangements for programmes that emphasise the importance of schools and universities working together (Welsh Government, 2018a). In 2018, Estyn undertook a thematic survey 'The professional learning continuum: mentoring in initial teacher education' (Estyn, 2018g). This report identified good features and areas for development in provision prior to the reform of ITE. It provided evidence to inform the new programmes that started in September 2019.

Initial teacher education providers help student teachers to organise their written reflections on their teaching through structured evaluation frameworks. These frameworks help students to consider aspects of their teaching and pupils' learning, and to propose their own targets for improvement. However, in the main, students do not reflect critically enough on their teaching or on their progress against targets in their written evaluations or otherwise. They do not show evidence of deeper thinking, such as making connections between other learning experiences, or drawing upon research findings or wider reading. Generally, students do not make enough progress in these skills over the duration of their initial training. Very few mentors discuss students' written evaluations, or provide feedback to help students to improve this aspect of their work. In addition, many students consider their written evaluations as a task to complete, rather than as a tool to help them develop. Only a few students make effective links between their lesson evaluations and their lesson planning. A majority of students do not ensure that their planned learning objectives for pupils describe learning specifically enough. This means that lesson evaluations do not analyse how successful their planned teaching strategies were in helping pupils.

In the best examples, mentors provide opportunities for students to develop their critical and reflective skills through learning conversations that link theory to practice. They help students to build the skills they need for planning and evaluation through reference to research and how this relates to experience and context. The Estyn thematic report on mentoring in ITE identified that highly effective mentors "have a good understanding of how to build students' knowledge and experience incrementally, starting with more structured and supported learning activities and developing students' independence, reflection and criticality as they become more experienced" (2018g, p.6). These mentors are often engaged in their own higher education study.

Schools where mentoring is effective involve their students fully in the professional learning activities that take place in the school. This provides students with a model of good practice in career-long professional learning, and a realistic picture of what good schools do. In many schools, mentors and leaders have limited knowledge and understanding of the ways in which the university develops student teachers' critical thinking and reflection skills. As a result, they do not make links to this learning to support the student teacher in developing this aspect of their professional practice.