

# Musical chairs

Understanding and tackling  
COVID-19 disruption to the  
teacher recruitment market

A report for Gatsby Foundation  
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GATSBY



## Executive summary

Teacher recruitment is highly seasonal, with most resignation and hiring activity occurring in the months of March, April and May. The timing of the school closures for the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the ability of schools to hire staff for September.

Combining data from the Teacher Tapp panel survey and SchoolDash job advertisement analysis, this report argues that **initial disruption caused by reluctance to interview teachers remotely has quickly become self-sustaining**. Once schools fail to make more senior appointments, these teachers, in turn, do not give notice in their current roles, so causing the dramatic falls in job advertisements we have seen.

We estimate there has been a **reduction of more than 5,000 advertised posts in secondary schools alone**. Where there are few attractive job advertisements in the market, so teachers decide to delay applying for a new role until next season. In the annual game of musical chairs, most teachers have stayed put.

Our survey data suggests that recruitment was disrupted in most primary and secondary schools in March. **In the primary sector, we think the contraction in job advertisements is even greater**, not least because pandemic disruption comes alongside a contraction in pupil numbers. Last year, 72% of primary teachers said their school had advertised at least one job, whereas this year the figure is just 50%.

**Far fewer teachers feel motivated to move jobs this year**. Although 1 in 4 teachers said they had been *considering* a job change during the

recruitment period, fewer than 1 in 10 (9%) were actively doing so once lockdown began. Reasons include a lack of available jobs, a feeling that staying was the morally right thing to do and a much lower appetite for moving home.

**Net teacher movement is likely to be much lower this year**. Half of all primary teachers said that all the teaching staff in their school are staying put next year; in a normal year, this figure is closer to one-third. In secondary schools, 57% of teachers reported no teacher exits in their department, compared to 44% in 2019.

**Expect disruption beyond September**. If teachers are unable to move due to disruption during the normal recruitment period it could mean more teachers choosing to leave at the interim resignation deadlines of Christmas and Easter, which is more disruptive for schools as classes must be taken over by another teacher mid-year.

**We believe newly qualified teachers are struggling to find first appointments**, simply because there are fewer vacancies. It is important that this cohort of new teachers, whose own training was severely disrupted, are supported into roles at schools who continue to experience staffing disruption caused by shielding teachers.

**There may be a benefit for schools in disadvantaged areas**, who have higher levels of turnover in normal years. In Spring 2019, 37% of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools were uncertain whether all jobs in their school would be filled. This year, that figure has dropped to 23%, suggesting a reprieve for schools who usually find it difficult to replace their departing experienced staff.

## Dramatic fall in number of secondary school teaching adverts during March, April and May

Recruitment of teachers by schools in England is highly seasonal, usually peaking in March-May since those who wish to join a new school from September must usually give notice by 31<sup>st</sup> May. However, this year's recruiting season has been dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures.

SchoolDash has been monitoring adverts placed by secondary schools for several years, so are able to estimate the impact of school closures on recruiting activity.

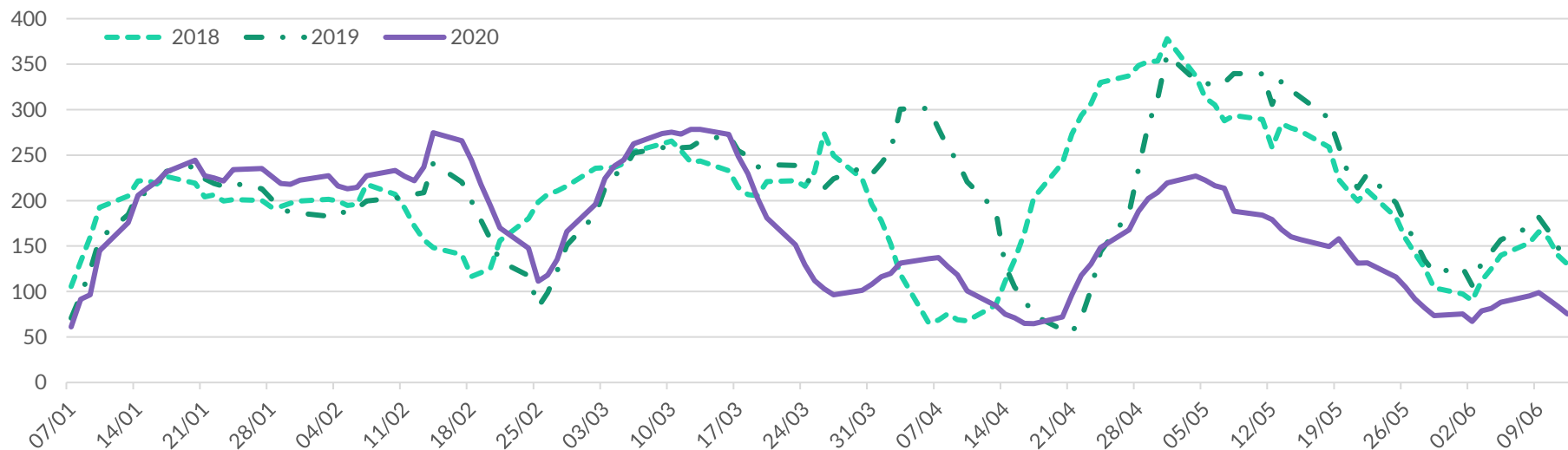
Posts advertised by secondaries on their own websites fell suddenly in mid-March and by April were down 50-60% compared to the same period last year. There were particularly large reductions in the core subjects of maths, science and English, but substantial falls were seen

in all subject areas. Though many schools *did* start advertising in April and May, the overall number of adverts remains down 40% on last year.

The aggregate year-on-year reduction in number of adverts exceeds 5,000 (which translates to over one per school, on average). It includes shortfalls of about 1000 science, 800 English and 500 maths job advertisements.

These lower rates of advertisements are likely both the consequence of, and a contributor to, the unwillingness of teachers to move schools during this pandemic. Thus, a disruption in the teacher recruitment market initially caused by difficulties in remote interviewing has quickly become self-sustaining.

### Number of secondary school adverts (7-day rolling average)

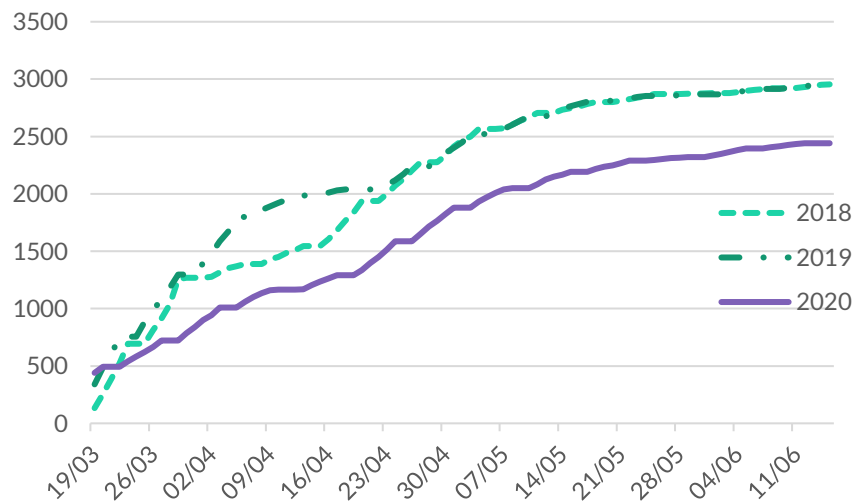


## Falls experienced across all secondary schools

Aggregate advertising can fall either because some schools stop advertising entirely, or because all schools slow down their recruitment process. The SchoolDash advertisement data can help to distinguish between these two phenomena. In a typical year, almost every secondary school needs to post a job advertisement at some point during the March-May high season.

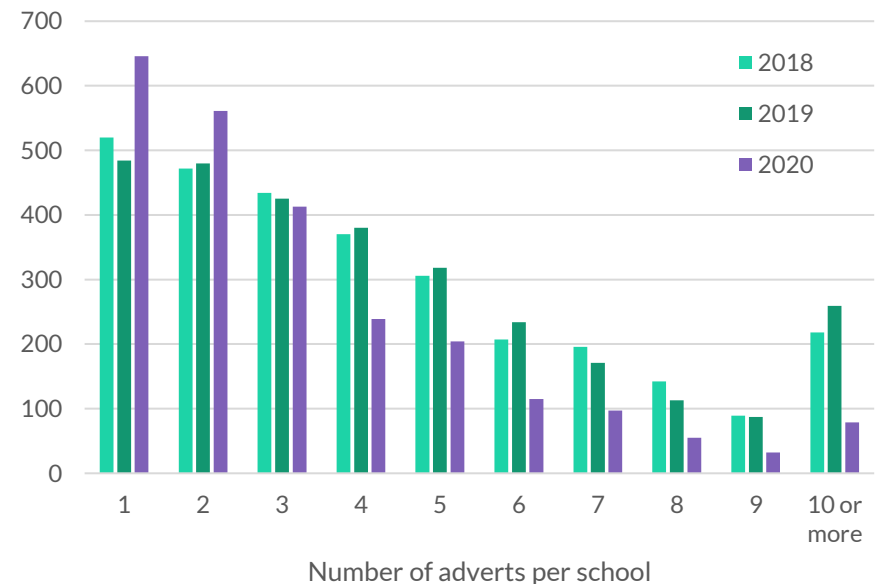
The chart below shows how numbers of secondaries advertising over this period cumulatively reaches almost 3000 by the end of May (with the divergence between the lines caused by the timing of Easter). By contrast, the cumulative number of schools advertising during this high season has been far lower, with the shortfall amounting to around 500 secondaries who have not advertised at all.

### Cumulative numbers of secondary schools advertising during the high season



Whilst these secondaries not advertising at all are significant, this does not fully explain the downturn in recruiting activity. Another factor is that schools are posting just one or two job adverts this year, rather than the large numbers they did during this season in 2018 and 2019. From this we infer that, even once schools have put remote interviewing procedures in place, they are either choosing not to use them at such high levels or they do not need to use them since fewer teachers have resigned.

### Rise in schools with just one advert and fall in number with many

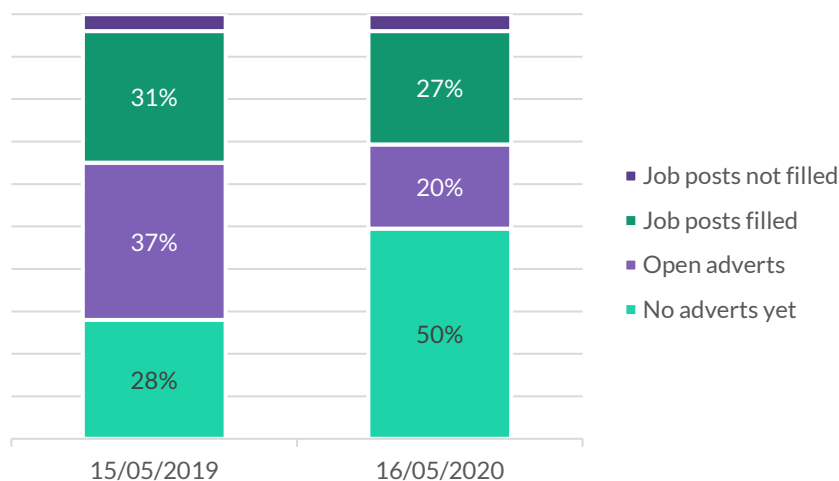


## Primary and secondary school teachers both report lower rates of advertising at their school

The job advert data shown earlier relates only to secondary school posts, but survey data from Teacher Tapp seems to corroborate the pattern across all schools. We asked teachers about current teacher recruitment at their school in mid-May both this year and last year. By comparing the change in their responses, we can develop a sense of major changes in the state of teacher recruitment.

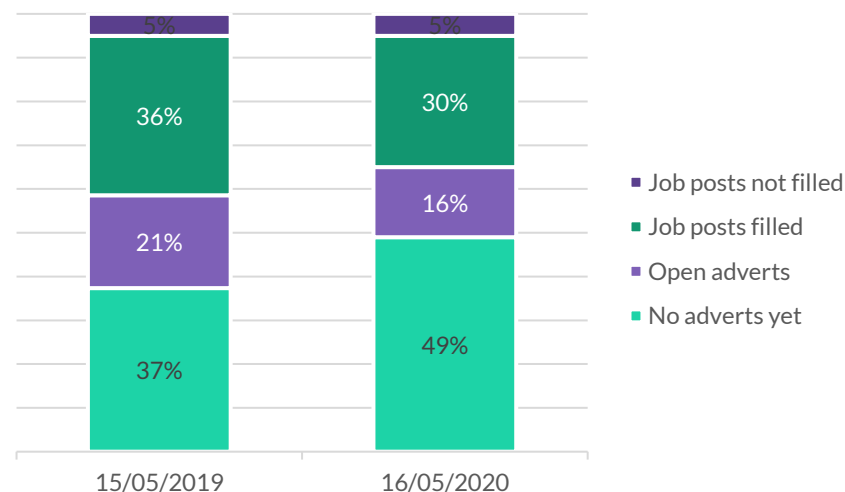
Primary schools are small enough to reliably ask teachers about resignations and advertisements across their entire school. We see a huge fall in numbers of primaries who have advertised a job this season, from 72% last year down to 50% this year. Whilst COVID-19 is likely to be a contributing factor, it is worth noting that primary school rolls are now falling and so demand for teachers would be expected to be less strong this season regardless.

### Primary schools had released far fewer adverts by mid-May



Secondary schools are too large to ask teachers about their whole school, so we ask them about their department. The proportion of teachers saying their department has advertised this season has fallen from 63% in 2019 to 51% in 2020. This is not such a large fall, and we know overall pupil rolls will be rising in this phase. However, if our figures reflect reality on the ground then lower teacher mobility is still likely.

### Secondary school departments saw a less pronounced fall in adverts



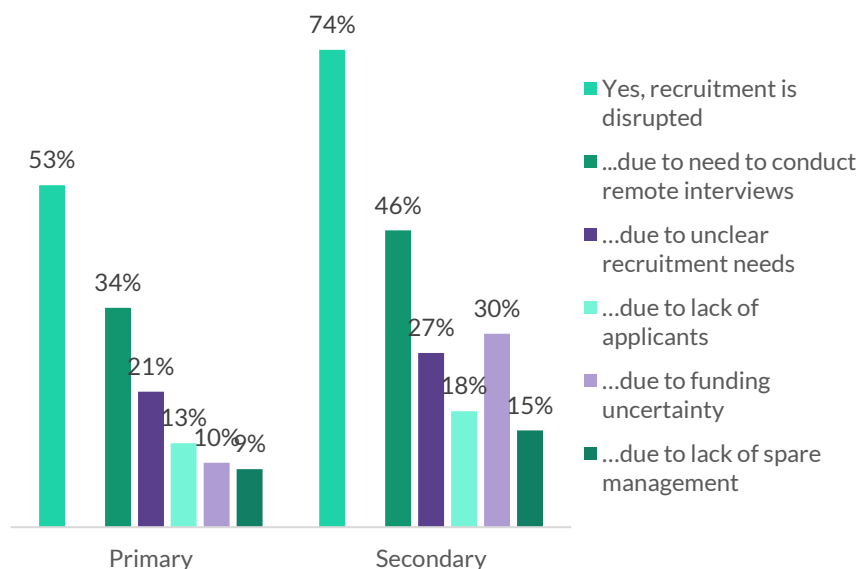
(Asking teachers about their school's recruitment position in this way is not necessarily ideal for two reasons. Firstly, they may not know what the status of recruitment for teaching posts is, particularly during a global pandemic where they are not in school. Secondly, the question was not written to capture the complexity of situations where multiple posts are advertised.)

## Job recruitment was delayed in March, but did not fully recover in April

As the teacher labour market dries up, it is important to assess whether it is *delayed* or whether it is *shrunk* in size for the season. Delays are a major problem since teachers are required to hand in their notice by May 31<sup>st</sup>, so much of the labour market cannot extend into the summer to overcome short-term disruptions.

When COVID-19 shutdown first happened before the Easter holidays, a third of primary and almost half of secondary senior leaders said that working out how to conduct remote interviews was a contributory factor to the recruitment disruption.

### COVID-19 caused recruitment disruption in most schools

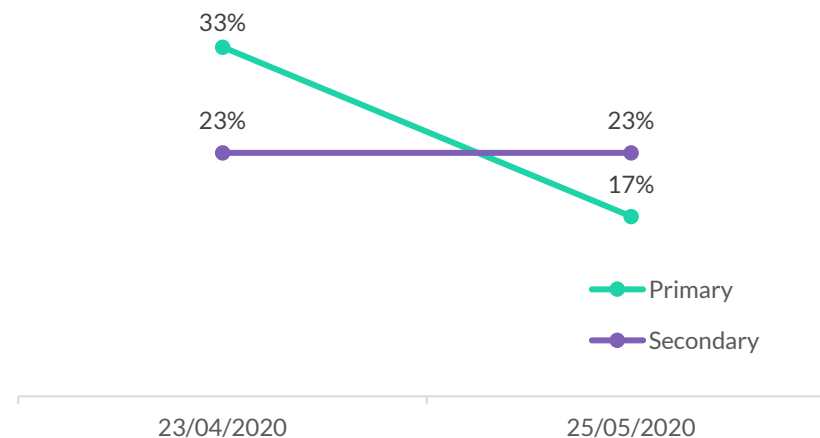


Once schools chose to pause job advertisements, it became an important contributor to teachers no longer seeking to move jobs this year. For example, one teacher told us:

*“I was job hunting prior to COVID-19. There are now virtually no opportunities available therefore it is highly likely that I will remain at my current school in September.”*

Towards the end of April, one third of primary senior leaders said that their teacher recruitment activities were *still* being delayed by school closures, though this figure was much lower by late May. By contrast, whilst secondary leaders were less likely to say recruitment was delayed in late April, one quarter of leaders were still reporting disruption in late May.

### Our teacher recruitment activities are STILL being affected by school closures

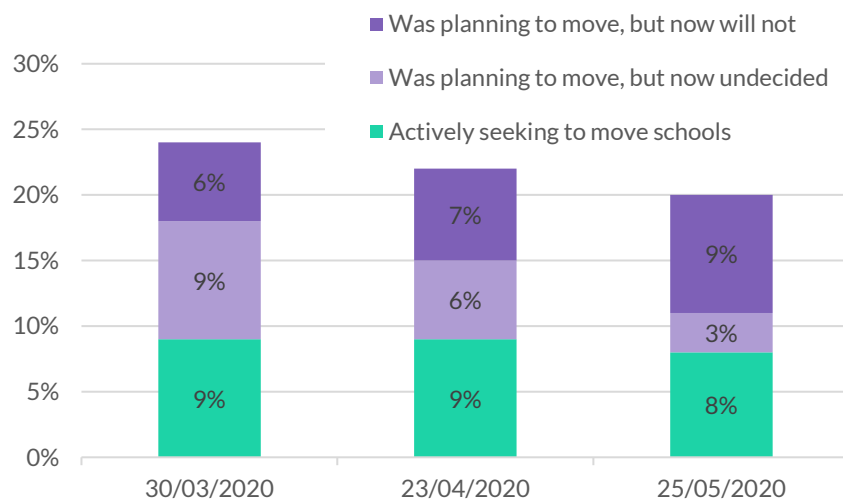


## Far fewer teachers feel motivated to move jobs, for a variety of reasons

Most teachers remain in post from one year to the next, but this COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected the number who say they were planning to seek a new role, but now are not. In late March, shortly after lockdown, a quarter of teachers told us that they had been planning to search for a new job this season, but just 9% said they were still actively doing so. Of the rest, 9% were undecided and 6% said they had decided to stay put this year.

We asked the same question again in late April and late May. The number saying they were actively seeking to move schools did not change, but gradually those who were undecided about seeking a job move have now decided they will not.

### Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your short-term career plans?



The desire by both governing bodies and teachers to avoid an online interviewing process has clearly been a contributing factor to the rapid decline in the teacher recruitment market this season. One teacher summed it up by saying:

*"I would not want to interview for a job in a school where I was unable to get a live vibe for what the school experience is like in that institution. It is far too important a decision to base on a zoom type interview!"*

Many other teachers said they had given up search for a job because there seemed to be so few available. However, there have been other motivations to remain at the same school this year. Several teachers told us that staying put felt morally right. For example:

*"I decided moving was no longer the right thing to do given the circumstances. I will see my school and our community through this as part of the leadership team and then look to move to a headship"*

COVID-19 has also severely affected family circumstances, so, in addition to the teachers who told us they cannot now seek a teaching job abroad, others said a family move motivated by a partner's career was now in doubt. Furthermore, parents have been at home caring for their own children, and it is not clear when this will come to an end, which explains why one teacher told us:

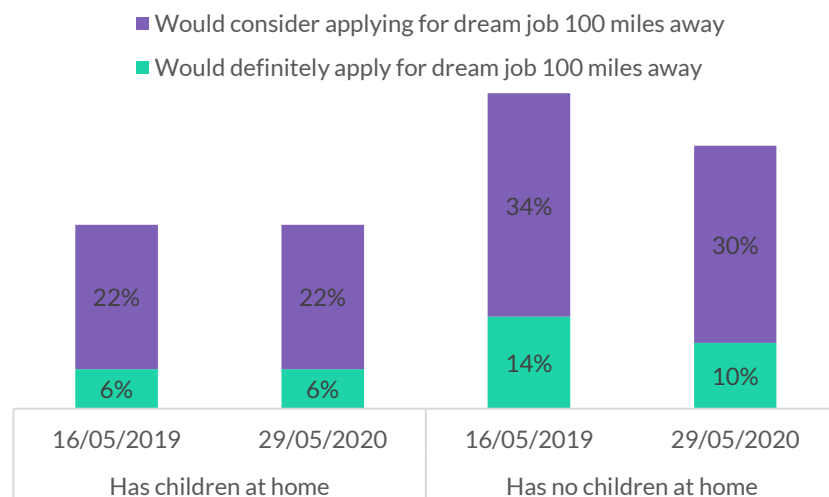
*"I've decided to resign from my current TLR instead of looking for promotion. My child is more important than my career."*

## Teachers do not wish to move home this summer

Though most school moves tend to be local, the teacher labour market always relies on some teachers moving to a new house to take up more distant career opportunities. This year, perhaps not surprisingly, teachers are particularly unwilling to move to a new house for a new job.

We asked teachers whether they would be willing to apply for a dream job 100 miles away in May 2019 and 2020. There was no change in response amongst those teachers with children, with just 6% saying they would apply and 22% saying they would consider applying. By contrast, there was a marked fall amongst those without children in their willingness to apply, down from 48% to 40%.

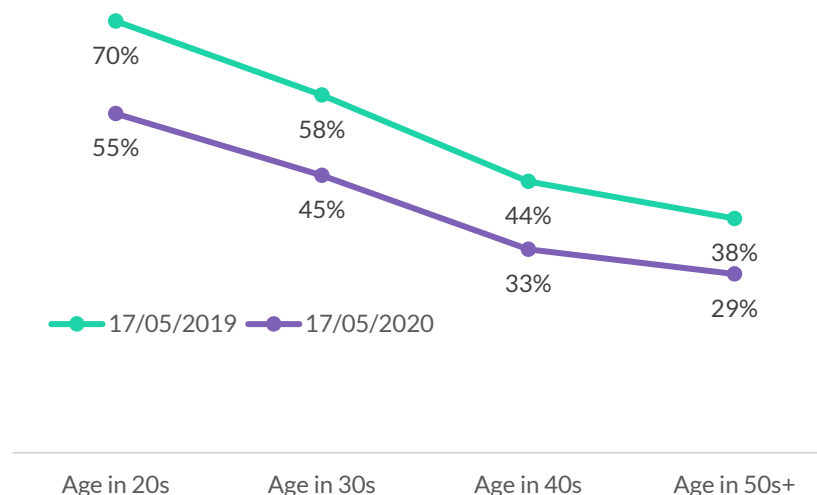
### Teachers without children at home have declined in their willingness to move house for a dream job



We asked a slightly different question to see whether teachers would be willing to move 100 miles to a school with shortages in exchange for a £50,000 salary rise. There were large falls in teachers willing to consider this, particularly amongst those in their twenties who fell in their willingness from 70% down to 55% this year.

Younger teachers are always more willing and able to consider moving to a new house, especially for a new school that offers a pay rise. Of course, the prospect of a £50,000 pay rise is proportionately higher for this group, but the fall in their desire to do so is instructive.

### Large fall in proportion of teachers who would happily move 100 miles in exchange for a £50,000 pay rise



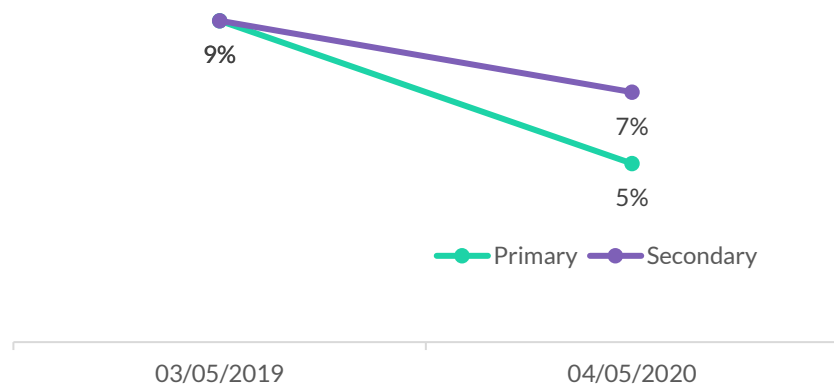


## We predict net teacher movements will be much lower overall this year

While there has been an element of delay to the teacher labour market this year, it is now increasingly clear that the number of teachers who move jobs will be far lower.

In primary schools, the proportion who told us they have handed in their notice had fallen to just 5% on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2020, down from 9% exactly one year earlier. Half of all primary teachers tell us that they believe all the teaching staff in their school will be staying put next year; in a normal year, this figure is closer to one-third.

### Large fall in resignations amongst secondary teachers by early May

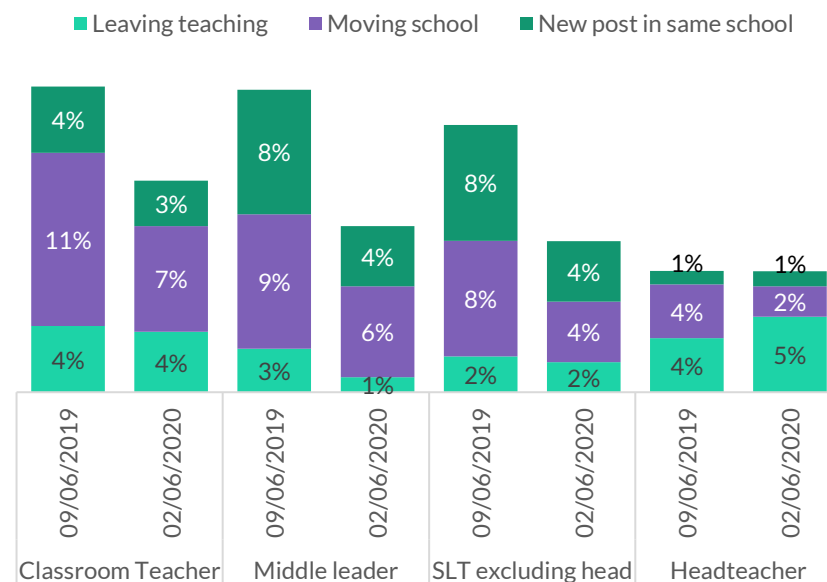


The figures for secondary schools, where we know interviewing has continued more smoothly and pupil rolls are rising, are much less marked. (Indeed, prior to mid-March the adverts monitored by SchoolDash were actually running at a higher rate in 2020.) The number who say they have handed in their notice by 4<sup>th</sup> May is 7%, down from 9% last year. In response to a separate question (not

shown here), 57% of secondary teachers say there are no teacher movements in their department, versus 44% one year earlier.

At the start of June, teachers reported their plans for next September. They reported large falls in the numbers who were either moving school or taking up a new post in the same school. This suggests that schools have not started backfilling any vacancies with internal promotions yet. (Note that we saw little fall in proportion of heads who are leaving their post this year.)

### Teachers less likely to be moving school or taking internal promotion this year

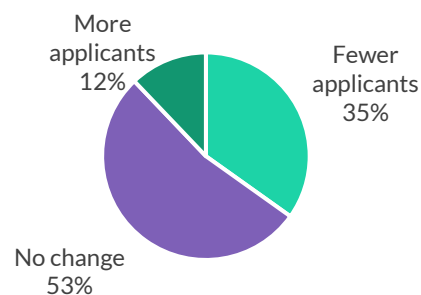


## Expect disruption beyond September

Lower teacher turnover is not a problem if every class has a teacher in September. Of course, September is likely to be rather unusual because there will be teacher absences due to shielding and potentially greater demand for teachers if social distancing measures are still in force. But setting aside these issues, there are some clear concerns that teachers will not have been appointed to all posts.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> May, we asked senior leaders whether response rates for job adverts were higher or lower than normal. Two-thirds of them were able to reply because their school had advertised. Of these, just 12% had more applicants than normal and 35% had fewer applicants. This means there is a risk that schools have failed to appoint by 31<sup>st</sup> May cut-off.

### Most leaders say they have had fewer job applicants than normal for roles

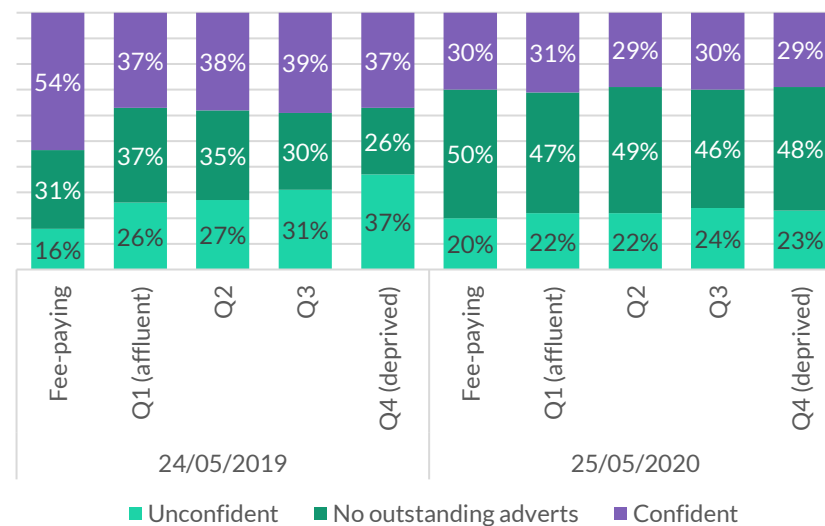


Beyond unfilled posts, there are other risks to the current situation. Teachers who are unhappy in their current school may have to stay on. Also, teacher moves may take place in greater numbers in January and Easter next year, which is extremely disruptive for students. We had a number of teachers who told us:

*I was looking to move for September; however, I now will be looking for a January start.*

One curious consequence of lower teacher mobility overall is that it disproportionately benefits more disadvantaged schools, who usually experience higher teacher turnover overall and make greater use of newly qualified teachers as their more experienced staff move on. Back in May 2019, 37% of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools felt uncertain about whether their outstanding job adverts would be filled; this year the figure for the same schools has fallen to just 23%. The recent announcement by Teach First that they will not be able to place all their participants with schools this summer confirms that recruitment difficulties have eased.

### Reduced inequalities in confidence in filling vacant job posts



## We believe newly qualified teachers are struggling to find first appointments

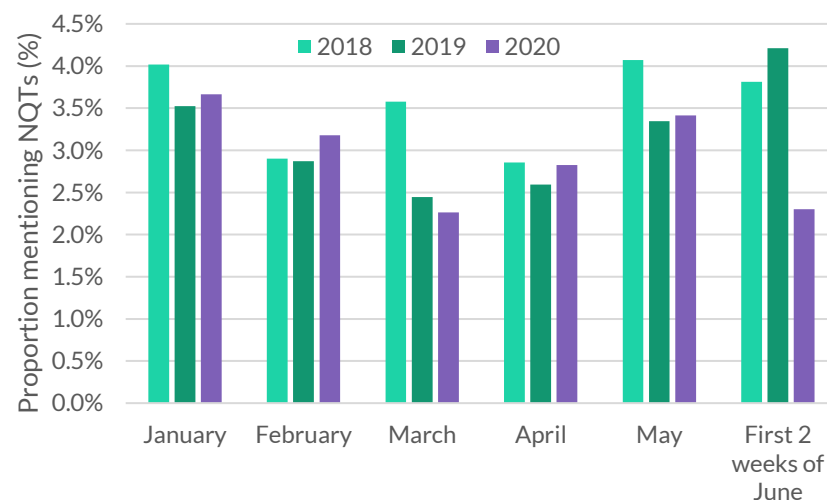
At the start of the pandemic, it was possible to argue that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) were in a strong position to benefit from the disrupted jobs market. After all, since they do not have to give notice to an existing post by 31<sup>st</sup> May, schools forced to recruit later into the summer would find themselves having to take on NQTs and others without existing appointments.

However, we now think that greater numbers than usual will fail to find a first appointment. The lack of job advertisements, particularly in the more urban and so disadvantaged schools, means there are simply fewer vacancies for NQTs this year. This appears to be the result of more teachers choosing to stay in their current post due to social and economic uncertainty. In normal years, teachers are lost to related job markets – international schools, private tutoring, teacher training, professional development work, employment at education companies, and so on. These opportunities have largely dried up during this recruitment season. So, we do not now believe there will be a flurry of advertisements suitable for newly qualified teachers in July.

Data on job adverts from SchoolDash corroborates this view. In the first two weeks of June, not only are there fewer job advertisements overall (as we reported earlier), the job adverts are *less* likely to mention that they are suitable for NQTs.

We hope that any unappointed pool of newly qualified teachers will have the opportunity to teach during the 2020/21 academic year, either via appointments in January or as supply cover in place of experienced teachers who cannot return to the classroom for health reasons. However, we should recognise that they may need additional support in taking on complex teaching roles in difficult circumstances since their own training was disrupted and so few will have experienced a heavy daily teaching load.

### Fall in frequency of adverts mentioning NQTs



## Notes on data and methodology

### The Teacher Tapp panel

The Teacher Tapp survey panel comprises teachers across the state and private sectors in England who download a mobile app, provide valid teacher credentials and allow it to notify them of new questions at 3:30pm. Teachers are recruited to panel via social and traditional media, promotion at CPD events, and via word of mouth in schools. All questions asked are multiple and single response questions.

### Calculation of Teacher Tapp panel weights

We apply post-stratification weights to the Teacher Tapp panel responses to ensure they reflect the demographic characteristics of teachers in England, using the following procedure:

1. We drop the results of all teachers for whom we cannot find a valid school identifier (Unique Reference Number) for the free text school name and postcode that they give us
2. We only retain teachers if they provide us with valid information on their gender, age and job post since these are the characteristics used for matching against the population in the School Workforce Census and Independent Schools Census
3. We calculate population shares in census data for 48 groupings of teachers who are allocated according to their phase, funding, region, gender, age and job post.
4. We calculate sample shares in the Teacher Tapp valid responses for each question, which yields sample weights as the ratio of population to sample share.

### Survey questions asked

Many of the survey questions were crafted in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, but others had been asked during the Spring 2019 recruitment season, thereby giving a one-year prior comparison point.

Survey question	Target	Date	Responses
Will you be changing jobs at the end of this year?		09/06/2019	3,241
		02/06/2020	7,252
Your dream job comes up in a school that is 100 miles away. Would you consider applying?		16/05/2019	3,074
		29/05/2020	7,222
Has anyone in your school given notice that they intend to leave this summer? Tick all the apply.	Primary	03/05/2019	1,724
		04/05/2020	2,761
	Secondary	03/05/2019	1,510

Survey question	Target	Date	Responses
Has anyone in your department/faculty given notice that they intend to leave this summer? Tick all the apply.		04/05/2020	4,651
Has your school already advertised for any jobs this season?	Primary	15/05/2019	1,624
		16/05/2020	2,745
Has your department already advertised for any jobs this season?	Secondary	15/05/2019	1,556
		16/05/2020	5,041
Suppose there is a school 100 miles away that is struggling to recruit. What is the minimum salary increment that would need to be offered (over your current pay) for you to consider applying to work there?		17/05/2019	3,228
		17/05/2020	7,630
Think of all the teaching job adverts that your school currently has posted. How likely are you to successfully fill them?		24/05/2019	3,151
		25/05/2020	7,283
Have you applied for any jobs in the past few months (whether successful or not)?		04/05/2020	7,434
Do you have a job secured for next September?		01/04/2020	6,994
		31/05/2020	7,142
Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your short-term career plans?		30/03/2020	6,894
		23/04/2020	7,156
		25/05/2020	7,283
Have your school's teacher recruitment plans for this season (i.e. September start) been disrupted by COVID-19? (You may tick more than one response)	SLT	30/03/2020	1,772
Which of the following statements most closely reflects your school's current teacher recruitment activities?	SLT	23/04/2020	1,868
		25/05/2020	1,829
If your school has placed job advertisements recently, do you feel the response is higher or lower than normal?	SLT	18/05/2020	1,947
Has the experience of COVID-19 and lockdown made it more or less likely that you will seek to reduce hours or leave the profession altogether in the next few years?		20/05/2020	7,694

### Supplementary open-ended response question

We asked Teacher Tapp panellists who said that COVID-19 had disrupted their short-term career plans to tell us more about why. This yielded 125 free text responses, which were coded into approximate reasons. The quotes used in this report derive from this question.

### The SchoolDash job advertisements

The websites of all secondary schools, sixth-form colleges and further-education colleges in England were indexed each weekday night and compared to the previous day in order to detect new advertised teaching positions, excluding trainee positions. This process does not capture all relevant vacancies because: (a) not all positions are advertised on school websites, (b) even when they are, they are not necessarily presented in a way that can be automatically indexed, and (c) websites are sometimes unresponsive or otherwise unavailable. For this reason, the data presented should be thought of as being based not on a comprehensive list of all vacancies but on a subset. However, positions were detected for well over 90% of schools and these are broadly representative of the overall population of schools.



## Acknowledgements

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## How to cite this publication

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## Where to find out more

[teachertapp.co.uk](http://teachertapp.co.uk)

[schooldash.com](http://schooldash.com)

[gatsby.org.uk](http://gatsby.org.uk)

tw: @teachertapp

tw: @SchoolDash

tw: @gatsbyEd

