

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London, SW1P 3BT

By email

3 November 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

The role of supply agencies in the education sector

We have been approached today by the Times Educational Supplement about a story they plan to run. Two unions, the NEU and NASUWT, are asking for additional budget for schools and academy trusts to cover and duplicate agency activities.

At a time when the education system is overloaded with demands as a result of the pandemic and budgets are stretched to full capacity, we believe this would be a false economy.

There is no doubt that supply teachers perform a critical role. In the last year for which ONS data is available, there were just shy of 1,000 teacher vacancies in England and on average, teachers took 4.1 sick days per year (ONS, June 2020).

Furthermore, evidence from NASUWT's annual survey finds supply teachers work this way out of choice - mainly because of ongoing frustrations with the education system or a desire to work more flexibly.

The best route for supply teachers getting and staying in work is via an agency. It is the most cost effective and safest option available.

One proposal from the unions is that local authorities could take over and supply teachers - but they are already overstretched. In another era, local authorities did perform the role an agency now undertakes but it was outsourced many years ago due to the growing burden it placed on them and the lack of resources to manage this safely or effectively.

Nor would it be practical to ask the school to undertake all the duties an agency does. Agencies exist because at extremely short notice, the school can call an agency and within a couple of hours, the agency has supplied a teacher to cover the classroom.

Providing this service means a recruiter is on call for work from 5.30am, until late in the evening. The agency maintains an accurate list of supply teachers and regularly vet them. When a supply teacher is placed on assignment, the agency charges the school a fee - to cover the wage of the supply teacher, their tax liabilities (such as employer national insurance), the costs of performing safeguarding checks on the staff member and to cover their own employee's wage. This isn't profiteering - this is running a vital service. Market forces mean that agencies exist and schools can shop around.

A final proposal may be to create a "bank" of supply teachers managed by central or local government. DfE's first action here should be to explore the cost/benefit analysis of how this has worked out in the health sector. It has now been found that bank nurses and doctors are procured at a far more expensive rate than that provided by an agency.

We believe supply teachers are vital to our education system, and so are the recruiters who supply vetted teachers to our schools and colleges. We stand ready to work with the Department on workforce planning strategies that ensure we are recruiting and retaining teachers in the right way. To us, this article is an unnecessary distraction at a pressing time for the education system.

Yours sincerely,



Neil Carberry
Chief Executive
Recruitment & Employment Confederation

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The Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC) is the voice of the recruitment industry, speaking up for great recruiters. We drive standards and empower recruitment businesses to build better futures for their candidates and themselves. We are champions of an industry which is fundamental to the strength of the UK economy - placing over a million people into permanent roles a year and a further million workers in temporary, contract and interim assignment on any given day.