



WHITE PAPER

Supporting a Stronger Education Workforce:

How Schools Mutual Services Can Help

Our Response to the “State of the Education Workforce”
Report

<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/press-releases/state-of-the-education-workforce-2026-summary/>



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**Nick Hurn OBE
SMS Chairman**



HOW SMS CAN HELP

The recent National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report, State of the Education Workforce 2026, offers a clear and, at times, sobering picture of the pressures facing education professionals across England. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the report highlights persistent challenges around pay, workload, and career progression - issues that affect not just teachers, but the entire school workforce.

At the same time, the Government, led by the Department for Education (DfE), has set ambitious objectives: expanding early years provision, recruiting 6,500 new teachers, and strengthening the education system for the long term. Achieving these goals will depend on how effectively schools can support, retain, and develop all staff - not just teaching professionals.

This is where Schools Mutual Services plays a vital role.



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A WORKFORCE UNDER PRESSURE

The NFER report reinforces a key reality: the education workforce is not a single, uniform group. Different roles face different challenges.

- Pay disparities remain significant. FE teachers now earn around 20% less than school teachers, while early years and support staff wages remain constrained despite slight improvements.
- Workload pressures persist. Teachers continue to work longer hours than comparable graduates, while FE teachers frequently take on unpaid overtime.
- Retention challenges are evolving. While teacher and early years retention is improving, support staff attrition is at its highest level in over a decade.
- Career progression gaps limit long-term workforce stability, particularly for support staff and early years professionals.

The report is clear: a targeted, workforce-wide approach is essential to meet national education ambitions.



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WHY SUPPORTING ALL STAFF MATTERS

Schools are complex ecosystems. Outcomes for pupils depend on a wide network of professionals, including:

- Teachers
- Teaching assistants and support staff
- Early years practitioners
- Administrative and operational teams

When any part of this system is under strain, the impact is felt across the whole school.

The Government's objectives - improving recruitment, strengthening retention, and raising standards - cannot be achieved without addressing the needs of every one of these groups.



HOW SCHOOLS MUTUAL SERVICES SUPPORTS THE WHOLE WORKFORCE

Schools Mutual Services is uniquely positioned to help schools respond to these challenges in a practical, sustainable way.

1. Enhancing Staff Wellbeing and Retention

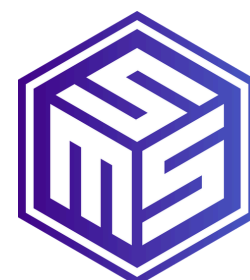
With workload and job satisfaction continuing to influence retention, providing meaningful support is critical. Schools Mutual Services offers solutions designed to improve staff wellbeing, helping schools create environments where employees feel valued and supported.

This directly aligns with the report's emphasis on improving retention across all workforce groups.

2. Supporting Financial Security Amid Pay Pressures

While schools may have limited control over national pay structures, they can influence the overall value of employment.

By providing access to financial support services, protection schemes, and employee benefits, Schools Mutual Services helps staff feel more secure - particularly important in sectors where real-term pay has declined.



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HOW SCHOOLS MUTUAL SERVICES SUPPORTS THE WHOLE WORKFORCE

3. Strengthening Workforce Stability

High attrition - especially among support staff - creates disruption and additional workload for remaining colleagues.

Schools Mutual Services supports schools in building more stable teams by reducing the risks and uncertainties that can lead staff to leave, helping to maintain continuity for pupils.

4. Enabling a More Inclusive Workforce Strategy

One of the key messages from the NFER report is the need for a comprehensive, targeted approach.

Schools Mutual Services enables schools to extend meaningful support beyond teachers, ensuring that:

- Support staff feel equally valued
- Early years practitioners are not overlooked
- Whole-school wellbeing is prioritised

This inclusive approach is essential for meeting Government expectations around system-wide improvement.





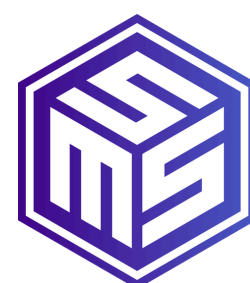
ALIGNING WITH GOVERNMENT OBJECTIVES

The DfE's ambitions - whether recruiting new teachers, expanding early years provision, or improving outcomes - depend on a resilient and motivated workforce.

By partnering with Schools Mutual Services, schools can:

- Improve staff retention across all roles
- Enhance workforce wellbeing and morale
- Provide tangible support despite funding constraints
- Contribute to a more sustainable education system

In short, Schools Mutual Services helps translate national policy goals into real, on-the-ground impact.



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LOOKING AHEAD

The State of the Education Workforce 2026 report is a call to action. It highlights not only the challenges but also the opportunity: to build a stronger, more balanced, and more sustainable workforce across the education sector.

Schools cannot solve these challenges alone - but with the right partners, they can make meaningful progress.

Supporting every member of staff is no longer optional – it's critical. And with the support of Schools Mutual Services, schools are better equipped to meet both the needs of their workforce and the ambitions of the education system as a whole.



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