

Shortage of physics teachers in the UK worse than ever

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An independent report published today directly links the steep decline in the number of students taking A-level physics to the shortage of expert physics teachers. With over 30% of physics teachers due to retire in the next ten years, the need to recruit more physics teachers is now more important than ever before.

This report confirms the anecdotal evidence that, although the problem was identified more than 10 years ago, government initiatives have had little impact on the number of physicists entering teaching and as a consequence physics in schools is heading for a crisis that will have major ramifications for the UK 's economy.

Written by Professor Alan Smithers and Dr Pamela Robinson from the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Buckingham , the report highlights the chronic shortage of specialist physics teachers in the UK as well as the need to provide frontline support and training for biology and chemistry specialists who also have to teach physics.

The Institute of Physics today welcomed the findings of the report and called on school heads and government to take urgent action before the situation worsens.

Professor Peter Main, director of education and science at the Institute of Physics said:

“We urgently need to recruit more specialist physics teachers. There are far fewer physicists going into teaching than chemists or biologists. Government should set specific recruitment targets for the individual sciences (rather than science as a whole) to reflect this and to help focus efforts and teacher recruitment initiatives”

He continued: “The number of trained physicists entering teaching will not be large enough to repair the damage for the foreseeable future. We have to live with the fact that the vast majority of people teaching physics at GCSE level and below do not have physics degrees and need subject support. This report clearly shows that pupils being taught physics by non-specialists are not performing as well. Professional development for non-specialists must be seen as a priority by both schools and the government”.

“The Institute of Physics believes that support and training for non-specialists must be seen as a priority by schools. Headteachers should encourage non-specialist physics teachers to take extra training and seek support to help them teach physics more effectively.”

“Government should provide ring-fenced funding and incentives to allow non-specialist teachers to get the training and support for teaching physics that they need.”

The Institute has invested £750K in a professional development programme called Supporting Physics Teaching to help teachers without a background in physics and is also working in partnership with the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the Gatsby Foundation to train science graduates with an aptitude for teaching to become physics specialists and hopefully go on to become physics teachers.

More information about the Supporting Physics Teaching programme

(SPT) and the Physics Enhancement Project, can be found here:
teachingphysics.iop.org/

Source: IoP

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