

Britain: Government expands use of classroom assistants to cover teacher shortage

By Liz Smith
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Education Secretary Estelle Morris has announced the most far-reaching changes affecting the conditions of teachers in England and Wales.

In a speech given to the Social Market Foundation, a pro-Labour think-tank, Morris outlined changes based on the findings of a study of teachers' workloads by accountants Price Waterhouse Coopers. These include a greater role for classroom assistants, in which current restrictions will be lifted to allow them to cover for teacher absences; supervise classes undertaking work set by a teacher; invigilate tests; take charge of lunch time activities; provide pastoral and other individual support to pupils. An additional 20,000 classroom assistants will be required, as well as an increase in the numbers of technicians whose responsibility will be to administer Information Technology subjects.

According to the government, this will free teachers to give them more time to plan and prepare lessons, and diminish the already mounting administrative pressures they face.

However, the real reasons for the changes are twofold. Firstly, to plug the haemorrhaging of teachers that has already led to a historic shortage of qualified staff. While some "golden hellos"—limited additional one-off payments of a few thousand pounds—have been provided to encourage new teacher recruits in shortage subject such as maths, science and English, staff shortfalls are increasing in secondary schools at a rate that would require a minimum of 10,000 new teachers just to plug the gap.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that over the next 15 years more than 45 percent of presently serving teachers will reach 60 and leave schools on retirement. It has also been identified that at least 18 percent of staff are teaching subjects they are not trained for.

Secondly, the proposals in no way reverse the

creeping privatisation of education, begun under the previous Conservative governments and continued under New Labour.

Under the guise of "raising standards", which has become a by-word for the assault on the state education system, Morris argues that "professional development activities" are drawing teachers away from the classroom, meaning there is an increasing reliance on supply (substitute) teachers. However, rather than providing greater numbers of fully trained permanent teachers, the government is proposing to extend the responsibilities of non-teaching staff. Whilst there is a role for support staff in schools, they are increasingly being used to cover over teacher shortages, taking on responsibilities for which they lack both experience and qualifications.

Immediately following Morris's speech, the press seized upon remarks made by Nigel DeGruchy, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). A public row ensued over DeGruchy's comment, which appeared to compare classroom assistants to "pig ignorant peasants". His remarks, taken out of context, saved the day for the government by diverting attention away from the central axis of its education proposals, which is to hand over extensive responsibilities to lower paid unqualified staff.

The number of classroom assistants employed in state schools has grown exponentially over the last 10 years. From 61,262 in 1997, the number has risen to 95,815 in 2001. There has also been a parallel increase in technicians from 12,747 to 15,046, and clerical staff from 35,082 to 41,285.

Labour took office in 1997 claiming that "education, education, education" was its number one priority, promising to reduce class sizes in primary schools to

less than 30 children. Since then, it has used the increase in support staff to advance the disingenuous claim that they have reduced the pupil : *adult* ratio in schools, which is not the same as the pupil : *teacher* ratio.

However, the increasing use of classroom assistants also masks the huge changes that have been made throughout the state education system, and particularly with regard to children with special educational needs (SEN). Throughout the 1980s and 90s, many special schools which catered specifically for children with severe emotional, behavioural and learning disorders, and provided a more therapeutic environment, were closed as part of government cuts in the public sector. Additionally many of the integrated resource units within ordinary schools that had offered a more protective environment for children with learning disabilities were also disbanded, putting thousands of children with SEN into mainstream classes. The government sought to justify this by arguing that placing these children into the conventional education system encouraged “social inclusion”. (This paralleled a similar move in mental health, with specialist psychiatric units being closed in favour of the mis-named “care in the community”.)

But without devoting the extra resources—for staff, facilities and materials—that teaching such children requires, it only increased the burden on ordinary teaching staff and overstretched school budgets.

It is under such conditions that there has been a huge growth of classroom assistants, particularly in secondary schools. For the most part, they are paid meagre wages for what in many inner city schools is a very stressful job, and have worse working conditions than other educational staff. Their pay ranges from £9,531 to £12,444, based on a 32.5-hour week, but many assistants are only paid during term time. While 35 percent of classroom assistants have a relevant professional qualification and 6 percent have appropriate degrees, this leaves nearly 60 percent with little or no experience or knowledge of the complexities of working with children.

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