

## **In brief of exploration Scarcity grinds by the Dutch Council of education, June 2023**

Despite thirty years of policy and other efforts to attract and retain teaching staff, the teacher shortages in the Netherlands persist. The demand for teachers remains high, and the shortages are proving stubborn. The Dutch Minister for Primary and Secondary Education asked the Dutch Education Council to explore ways in which education can be provided in a context of the continuing shortage of teachers.

The Council begins this exploration by stressing the importance of efforts to recruit and retain more people for the teaching profession. This is both a necessity and a priority; everything possible needs to be done to ensure that there are sufficient teachers.

A persistent teacher shortage creates a constant need to find ways of spreading scarce teaching resources fairly across the system. The collective responsibility for this requires that stakeholders embrace the principle of solidarity. Teacher shortages cannot be allowed to be a problem only for those schools and school boards which are actually confronted with staff shortages. The Council appeals to all stakeholders not to turn a blind eye to this issue, but to join forces and tackle it in unison. This requires an embracing of solidarity by all schools and departments within a school board's aegis, by all school boards, all local governments within a municipality or region and all educational areas and regions in the Netherlands.

The teacher shortages in primary and secondary schools are not just stubborn, but also unequally distributed, largely running along socioeconomic lines. This causes the Education Council major concerns, because it exacerbates the inequality of opportunity within education and therefore social inequality within society. In this exploration, therefore, the Council stresses that combating social inequality must go hand in hand with identifying and assessing the available options for delivering education in a context of persistent teacher shortages.

### *Persistent teacher shortages put education under pressure*

The present teacher shortages are nothing new. This has long put heavy pressure on schools and the education they seek to provide, leading to growing pressure of work and concomitant risks to the quality of teaching and the development opportunities for pupils, especially those in a socially vulnerable position.

The shortage of primary school teachers reached almost 10,000 fte in 2022, while almost two-thirds of vacancies in secondary schools are difficult to fill. The impact of teacher shortages is felt everywhere, but is unevenly spread across schools, regions and subjects. Schools in the five largest Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Almere), schools with a complex educational mission, special schools, specific subjects in secondary education and pre-vocational secondary education face greater shortages. Current estimates suggest that the shortages will not reduce, and will in fact increase further after 2030.

The ongoing shortage of teachers means that unqualified teachers are giving lessons, vacancies go unfilled, classes are combined or sent home, or subjects temporarily disappear from the timetable. The already high pressure of work for teachers is increasing further and trainee teachers can no longer be given adequate supervision.

### *Dealing with persistent and unevenly distributed shortages demands solidarity*

The fact that socially vulnerable pupils are more impacted by the teacher shortage acts as a catalyst for unequal educational opportunities and social inequality, because good-quality education and

training is exceedingly important for children from households that are relatively socioeconomically deprived. This in turn has a major impact on their development and future opportunities.

Teacher shortages must not be allowed to be a problem exclusively for schools and school boards which are actually confronted with shortages. And the negative impact of a teacher shortage must not be allowed only to affect certain groups of pupils and their parents. The Council appeals to all stakeholders to join forces in a genuine effort to embrace this collective mission from a basis of solidarity. There are no oven-ready solutions; it will demand vision, careful judgements and choices and the intervention of central government, local authorities, school boards, school leaders and teachers working together.

#### *School boards and school leaders*

Addressing the teacher shortages is thus a collective task which demands vision and commitment from all school boards and school leaders, including – or precisely – if those school boards or school leaders are not themselves (yet) facing teacher shortages. Each school board will need to work with school leaders and teaching teams, other staff and parents, in a properly thought-through approach which takes account of their own local context, to search for ways of spreading the scarcity of teachers as fairly as possible. This requires solidarity not only between schools falling under the aegis of a given school board, but also between boards across a municipality or region, between municipalities and schools and between all school boards across the Netherlands.

The teacher shortages provide an extra stimulus for school boards and school leaders to ensure that they meet the standards of a good employer. Offering an attractive career, a safe working environment, pleasant working conditions and good terms of employment and fringe benefits are important in attracting and retaining teachers. The terms of employment and working environment at schools with major shortages can be strengthened in a targeted way with a view to making working at those schools a more attractive prospect. This will require structural additional funding from central government for those schools which are most heavily impacted by the teacher shortages.

#### *Central government*

At present, government influence and input focuses mainly on recruiting and retaining teachers. This is crucial, but needs to be combined with vision, steering and setting frameworks for addressing the persistent teacher shortages. To enable school boards and school leaders to address the teacher shortages in a way that is appropriate for their schools, and to enable the unequal distribution of the shortages to be addressed, central government needs to provide funding that is structural and adequate. The government is advised to adopt caution in providing one-off funding and from funding individual schools directly, because this can be counterproductive in terms of encouraging stakeholders to embrace solidarity and work together collectively and sustainably to address the persistent teacher shortages. The government also needs to hold off from imposing extra ambitions and missions for education, so that teachers are able to focus on the core of their remit, namely delivering and developing education.

#### *Options for addressing teacher shortages*

In the Education Council's view, the options for delivering education in a context of persistent teacher shortages fall into two categories: one focusing on limiting the education offered, in terms of content and time, and the other on how the work in schools is organised and how the available people and resources are deployed. Both option categories, or combinations thereof, are intended to

make it easier to provide education with the available number of teachers. Since many of the available options will take time to develop and apply, it is important to make a start as soon as possible.

### *Limiting the teaching offer*

The first category of options for delivering education in a context of teacher shortages focuses on limiting the education offered. There are three ways of doing this. First, the government could limit the statutory mission of schools, possibly by curtailing the amount of teaching time (the statutory number of hours for which pupils must receive education), possibly in combination with easing the national attainment targets and standards. At individual school level, school boards, school leaders and teachers could make judicious choices on trimming the education offer. The national attainment targets allow schools lots of scope to organise and make choices in the education they provide. This requires a deep awareness of the curriculum on the part of teachers and school leaders. Finally, managing societal expectations will help in limiting the education offer.

Limiting the education offer in schools is only a worthwhile option for addressing a teacher shortage if it is combined with a reduction in the teaching time for pupils. The time spent by teachers giving lessons is by contrast not reduced at all, or at least to a much lesser extent, so that education can continue to be provided to pupils with fewer available teachers. Lowering the statutory requirements would require amendment of the legislation, which would apply for a longer period and therefore needs to be carefully thought through. Based on the principle of solidarity, the Council suggests considering to what extent vulnerable groups can be exempted from any restrictions to teaching content and time.

### *Organisation teaching at schools*

These options for addressing teacher shortages are focused on the way in which teaching is organised in schools and the associated deployment of people and resources. The options are concerned with the deployment of teachers and other professionals in the school. The core idea is that the available teachers should be deployed where they are needed most, namely in delivering and developing education, and in those locations where the teacher shortages are the most pressing. Each school must also devise and develop ways, appropriate to its own school context, in which others (such as teaching assistants or other professionals) can be deployed in the school in a way that keeps the teaching profession attractive as well as contributing to addressing the teacher shortages. Judicious deployment of other professionals can help mitigate the continuity risks posed by teacher shortages. This requires vision: continuity of education is about more than simply keeping the school open. To safeguard educational quality, it is important that the government adopts a clear competence structure incorporating legal quality standards regarding who is permitted to deliver what within schools, and under what conditions.

The use of digital technology is often cited as a means of dealing with staff shortages. However, the Council does not see this as a practical option here, because the deployment of digital technology does not mean that fewer teachers are needed. The Council sees the fact that the use of (smart) digital technology has negative implications for equal opportunities in education and for social equality as a further reason for rejecting this as an option for addressing teacher shortages.