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Supply Teacher Costs Soar to £1.4bn as Pupils Report Falling Behind in Classrooms

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The cost of hiring supply teachers across England has surged to nearly £1.4 billion in the past year, placing growing pressure on school budgets and raising concerns over classroom standards. With headteachers warning of unsustainable costs and students voicing fears of disrupted learning, the issue is becoming an increasingly urgent challenge for the education sector.

According to recent analysis of Department for Education (DfE) data, academy schools accounted for the bulk of this expenditure, spending £847 million on agency staff during the 2023–24 academic year. This figure represents a near doubling, in real terms, from 2014–15, highlighting how heavily schools are now dependent on agency supply teachers due to a chronic shortage of permanent staff.

Regent High School headteacher Gary Moore told *Sky News* that costs for a reliable supply teacher can exceed £200 per day. For certain subjects, such as physics, daily rates can reach £300 to £400. “Schools are being held over a barrel,” Moore said, adding that the lack of available specialists further exacerbates the financial burden.

For students, the effects are equally troubling. GCSE pupil Mineche Kyezu-Mafuta recounted having five different substitute teachers in one week for science lessons alone. “Students were out of their seats, throwing stuff, talking, just anything you could think of would be happening in that class,” she said. “It was very loud... no one was doing their work.”

This instability is reflective of a broader problem: teacher vacancy rates remain three times higher than they were ten years ago. More teachers are leaving the profession than entering it, with exits outpacing newly qualified entrants by a two-to-one ratio last year.

Teacher pay is also lagging. Since 2015, the median salary has risen by just under 30%, while inflation over the same period has jumped by around 50%. As a result, many professionals have either left the sector or chosen not to enter at all, compounding the reliance on supply agencies.

Schools are additionally facing steep agency commission rates. A teacher earning £30,000 annually could cost a school upwards of £36,900 when hired through an agency, equating to a 23% markup. These costs rise in line with higher salaries. Andy De Angelis, a secondary school head in west London, described the current system as inefficient: “UK agencies provide a CV and possibly help with references. I arrange the interviews.”

Despite promises from the DfE to recruit 6,500 new expert teachers and reduce reliance on agency workers, the reality on the ground remains unchanged for many schools. A spokesperson from the department noted that there are already “over 2,300 more secondary and special school teachers in classrooms this year,” and that over a thousand more people than last year have accepted places on teacher training courses beginning this September.

However, uptake of the government-backed Crown Commercial Service (CCS) framework, aimed at offering better value for money in agency hiring, remains minimal. The NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers) has criticised the initiative, stating that fewer than 0.5% of school leaders reported using the CCS framework. “This creates unnecessary cost and adversely affects supply teachers, schools, and pupils,” the union said.

The union argues that the best long-term approach would be for the government to support schools and local authorities in building and maintaining their in-house pools of supply teachers, rather than depending on third-party agencies.

In the meantime, many students continue to face instability in the classroom, and school leaders are left juggling strained budgets to maintain even the most basic teaching standards.