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What happens to teachers after maternity leave? Understanding retention and the role of flexibility

A new report from The Key Group provides fresh insights into the experience of teachers returning to work following maternity leave—and its implications for teacher retention across the profession.

The report follows nearly 3,000 female teachers across England who commenced maternity leave in the 2020/21 academic year. These teachers were tracked for four years to examine how their employment patterns changed and whether they remained in their schools. The study, using contract and leave data from the Arbor MIS platform, is the first of its kind at this scale and offers a unique lens on how flexible working supports teacher retention.

While media narratives often highlight the challenges of balancing teaching and parenthood, the data tells a more nuanced story. Teachers returning from maternity leave were slightly less likely to leave their school than the general teaching cohort. Of particular note is that women who returned to work part-time were significantly more likely to remain in their roles than those who stayed full-time. Among those who switched to part-time, only 32% had left within four years, compared to 45% of those who returned full-time.

This finding is especially important given that women in their thirties are both the largest group in the teaching workforce and the group most likely to leave the profession. The report reinforces the value of part-time and flexible roles as long-term retention strategies rather than short-term accommodations. Yet it also points to a tension in school systems where the structure of secondary timetables and accountability pressures around exam results often make flexible working more difficult to implement.

School phase matters too. Returners in primary schools were more likely to stay than those in secondary schools. In London secondary schools, a striking 60% of teachers who had taken maternity leave left their school within four years, prompting questions about how geography, phase, and cost-of-living pressures interact with career sustainability.

The report also highlights that while 31% of female classroom teachers work part-time, this drops steeply in leadership. Just 8% of female headteachers work part-time, raising concerns about leadership accessibility for mothers and the future diversity of leadership pipelines. Some trusts are experimenting with job-sharing models and flexible headship roles, but these remain the exception.

For schools seeking to retain talented educators—particularly in girls' schools, where modelling leadership pathways for young women matters—this report is a timely reminder that retention and equity are closely linked. Cultural expectations, timetabling systems, and leadership pathways all shape whether experienced female educators can stay, thrive, and lead.

References

West Jones, N., & Blair, J. (2025). What Happens to Teachers After Maternity Leave? The Key Group. Retrieved from Retrieved from <https://thekeygroup.com/news-insights/what-happens-to-teachers-after-maternity-leave>