

Labour admits class sizes are rising in Britain

Liz Smith
3 September 1999

David Blunkett, Britain's Education Minister, admitted on Tuesday that class sizes in secondary schools (pupils aged 11 to 16-years old) have risen in the last year by 1 percent, from 21.7 pupils per teacher to 21.8. His statement exposed earlier claims by Prime Minister Tony Blair that the overall figure for all age groups showed a reduction in class sizes for the first time in five years.

Interviewed on BBC Radio 4's Westminster Hour, Blunkett said, "I concede that there has been a 1 percent worsening in secondary schools this year. We said we would concentrate on the infants. The pupil/teacher ratio has come down in primary schools as a whole. So we are fulfilling our pledges."

His claim referred to Labour's election manifesto pledge to reduce class sizes to 30 by the year 2001. Blair had boasted of this in the government's second annual report in July. This pledge only concerned infants' schools, and the £386 million given over to achieve this target has fallen far short of what is required. It has led to a situation where there are more mixed-age classes in primary schools and inappropriate conversions within schools to provide extra classrooms. In order to meet the pledge, moreover, cuts are being made elsewhere in education services.

Responding to Blunkett's admission, John Dunford, general secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, warned of a "lost generation" of secondary school pupils who will not benefit from the extra spending on education. "The government is giving a low priority to secondary schools", he said. "They are having to make do with fewer teachers, and that leads to economies being made. It means larger classes, and more stressful teaching situations, particularly in schools where it is difficult to teach. We support the work the government is doing in primary schools. We want children to come to secondary school with a higher level of education, but we don't want it to happen at the expense of

secondary schools' budgets."

Government spokesmen blamed the rise in class sizes on "a decade of underfunding of the system which has fed through". It is true that the previous Conservative government made severe inroads into education funding, but Labour has continued this. Spending on education dropped in Labour's first two years of office, falling from 4.9 percent to 4.7 percent of GDP. The additional £19 billion allocated to certain educational sectors that was announced earlier this year will only bring total spending to 5.1 percent of GDP in the next three years, less than that spent by the Major Tory government (5.3 percent). The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that, over the lifetime of the government, Labour will increase spending on education by less than 2.9 percent. This is barely above the current rate of inflation of 2.2 percent, and does not make up for years of under-resourcing.

Labour's pledge on infant class sizes is being carried out in the most divisive way possible. Firstly, in restricting funding for reducing class sizes only to infant schools, as laid out in the School Standards and Framework Act, it puts a wedge between the primary and secondary sectors where classes are also too large. More fundamentally it again pits parents against one another in the scramble for their child to have a place at the more popular schools. In the last year there have been numerous protests by groups of parents denied the school of their choice.

As with other aspects of its social policy, Labour's approach is to claim that it is addressing the crisis in education, whilst keeping this as nothing more than a paper exercise. Blunkett said that it could take four terms of office, or 20 years, to free the resources necessary to invest in education.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact