

# Hundreds of school rebuilds scrapped by British government

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On July 5, Conservative Party Education Secretary Michael Gove announced the cancellation of the previous Labour government's £55 billion school building programme. Hundreds of secondary and primary schools promised new buildings and refurbishments have seen their hopes dashed.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has suspended projects for 715 new schools and a further 123 academies will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

The decision has provoked anger and disgust from tens of thousands of parents, architects and the building trade. The haste in which the decision was made led to 25 errors in the report of the names of the schools that would continue with rebuilds or have the plans scrapped. Dozens of schools that were initially told that their school rebuilding project would continue found out a few days later that they would not. Gove was forced to make a humiliating public apology in Parliament over the errors, but more significantly he did not climb down on his decision.

This is the third major education intervention in the few short months of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's existence. The aim of scrapping the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) is to immediately slash billions in capital investments in schools. But it is also linked to plans to close hundreds of state funded schools and replace them with Academies and "free schools".

Building Schools for the Future (BSF) was a scheme proposed under the Labour government to rebuild or cosmetically smarten 3,500 secondary schools from 2004 to 2023 under the Private Finance Initiative. In 2007 the scheme was extended by a £1.9 billion scheme for primary schools. It was dubbed the most ambitious and biggest programme of school rebuilding

to be undertaken in the world. However, to date only 180 have been built and a further 231 were granted approval to start.

The scheme has seen a massive transfer of public funds to the private sector. Building and associated companies have made huge windfalls through the scheme, which has been dogged with bureaucracy and massive overspends. It takes many schools up to three years of negotiations and bidding with various consultants and businesses before any agreement can be reached.

The coalition government have been able to utilise this as a justification to abolish the scheme. But cutting it leaves hundreds of schools in a state of disrepair. Every borough across the country can cite lists of schools that are dilapidated and in a state of chronic disrepair and are overcrowded and hazardous.

In Sandwell, a suburb of Birmingham, Britain's second largest city, a number of schools have to tolerate impossible conditions. Perryfields High School was built in 1857 for 500 children and now has 1,000 pupils and uses temporary classrooms from the 1970s. Another school in the area has had mobile classrooms for 40 years that were only meant to last 25.

The government has angered a broad swathe of its own constituency, including Tory and Liberal Democrat MPs. Some construction firms, which have already been heavily hit by the financial crisis, say that 70 percent of their workload will be affected. Liverpool City Council estimates 1,500 full-time job losses, including 1,000 construction jobs as a result.

The right-wing press who support the austerity package being unleashed were furious at Gove for complicating what they see as a crucial campaign of cuts by his blunder.

The *Sunday Telegraph* July 10 revealed that "at a

series of meetings last weekend Mr. Gove was repeatedly warned by top officials that the £55 billion Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme was a minefield which could not simply be abandoned at a stroke.

“The minister was advised he should simply announce his intention to axe the programme—and should also say he was launching a consultation exercise with local education authorities.”

An anonymous insider quoted by the paper said, “Michael was warned in strong terms not to go ahead with what he was planning to do—but he wouldn’t be told. The list, with all its errors, was rushed out and we have all seen the consequences of that.”

The paper also alleges that as late as the day of the announcement of the scrapping of BSF, multiple versions of lists were still being prepared for the education secretary, and that “the exact criteria for which school projects would be stopped, which would be reviewed and which would be allowed to go ahead, it was suggested, had still not been decided just hours before the minister had to make his Commons announcement.”

The paper’s editorial the next day stressed, “Given the size of the deficit, across-the-board cuts in spending are inevitable. The Coalition is to be commended for its refusal to shy away from this unpopular but necessary task.”

It then warned, “This week’s events confirm that cuts, while vital, will be accompanied by anger, bitterness and resentment—which Labour, for partisan reasons, will do everything it can to exacerbate. Under such circumstances, ministers must be sure that their arguments and evidence are watertight before they put them to the public. The Coalition’s project—and Mr Gove’s part in it – is too important, and too vulnerable, to be undermined so easily.”

The concern is not the fate of millions or the impact the decision will have on the education of children, but how to impose austerity without provoking ferocious and widespread public opposition. The *Economist* July 8 again offered advice to Gove to “keep the message simple” but push ahead with the cuts.

The scrapping of the scheme must be considered in line with the central planks of the coalition’s education policies launched in April—the “free schools” project and the massive extension of Academy

schools. Some 700 groups have applied for “free school” status. These schools will be built and maintained through the cutting of budgets of existing state schools, sacking teachers and closing down schools.

Free schools, which will not be under local authority control and free from the national curriculum, will be in competition with nearby state schools and force their closure. The government aims for all schools to be either “free or academy”. In total 1,700 academies will be formed over the next years. These will be increasingly privately run.

All planning regulations have been scrapped to accommodate the free schools. They can be set up in offices, disused warehouses and parking lots. Organisations wishing to start a free school do not need planning permission to convert existing buildings for “change of use” and the building regulation system is being scrapped.

Initial capital funding of £50 million (which would only produce four to five schools) will be found by slashing the IT budget earmarked for state schools to support this vital aspect of the curriculum. The initial plan was to take the funds from the Free School Meals budget, which provoked outrage and was withdrawn. Some of the BSF budget will be diverted for these schools, which will be controlled by the private sector with land held by the trustees rather than the state.

The coalition education policy is a major escalation of the privatisation of education under Labour. It will end any notions of the right to free, comprehensive education. While the measures have been met with anger and hostility by broad sections within Britain, the teaching unions have refused to mount any campaign or mobilise parents and teachers against this offensive. They have called instead for parents to organise local meetings and decide school by school on what action they wish to take, advising of letter writing and petitions and lobbies of the Tory party conference.



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