

Report reveals largest UK education cuts since 1950s

Harvey Thompson
15 November 2011

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has calculated public spending on UK education will fall by 14.4 percent between 2010/11 and 2014/15. This is the largest cut in education spending over any four-year period since at least the 1950s.

Last year, following a detailed examination of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's budget measures, which contained six consecutive years of austerity, the IFS concluded that Britain faced the "longest, deepest, sustained period of cuts to public services spending at least since World War II."

The IFS report, *Trends in education and schools spending*, follows this analysis to reveal the coalition intends to target all areas of public education for "historic" funding cuts between 2010/11 and 2014/15. The cuts are to include spending on the early years, schools, further education (post-16 education outside of schools) and higher education (universities).

Spending on the early years is expected to be slashed by over 20 percent in real terms. The previous Labour government made much of its policies in the area of early-years provision, such as the Sure Start programme and the Children's Centres. These schemes were cheaply run services to conceal cuts in the welfare state, but many of the often poorest young children and families were forced to rely on them.

Funding for Sure Start and childcare, as well as budgets for the early intervention grant, which covers childcare as well as teenage pregnancy services and other youth support schemes, will be cut by £100 a child from 2012—more than three times that suffered in the wealthier parts of the country.

Spending on the early intervention grant will be cut by 13 percent in real terms in 2011/12 and cumulatively by 22 percent by 2014/15.

This weekend, it was announced that the government is set to close 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres across the country, with children's charities warning of a huge resultant increase in UK child poverty.

Planned overall cuts to college education (16-19 year-olds) spending are likely to be around a fifth of present funding, with similar cuts to youth services. College building projects are to have their budgets more than halved.

Spending on education for those aged 16 to 19 years is set to fall by 4.1 percent in real terms in 2011/12. A large portion is accounted for by cuts to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), closed to new applicants in January. The EMA was introduced by the previous Labour government in 2004, with students from poor households at college and sixth form receiving £30 a week to help pay for travel, stationery or course books.

The report states: "There are also planned cuts to further education and sixth form funding of more than 2% in real terms in 2011–12. Sixth-form spending is then set to fall by a further 15.8% between 2011–12 and 2014–15; no longer-term spending plans for other areas of further education are currently available."

The largest real-terms cuts will be current spending on higher education; which will witness a reduction up to 40 percent cut, while capital spending is to be more than halved.

The government intends to recoup at least part of this shortfall from students as a result of the increase in tuition fees to £9,000 (\$14,340) a year from 2012. This huge sum automatically elevates the UK into the position of the third most expensive place in the world to acquire a degree qualification.

According to a recent report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD),

compared with the other 34 OECD members, students in Britain are expected to personally contribute a higher percentage of the cost of their degree—funding 65 percent of study costs, more than twice the OECD average. State funding of education across the UK is low, with total spending on education 0.2 percent of GDP, less than in the rest of the OECD.

The IFS report states that compared with the growth in student numbers in recent years, “average growth in higher education spending per student has been much lower, at 0.7% per year in real terms. This means that by 2010-11, higher education spending per pupil will be over £1,000 *lower* than schools spending per pupil, having been over £1,000 *higher* in 1997-98.”

According to calculations used in the IFS report, from the mid-1950s onwards the level of spending on education increased from just under 3 percent of national income to reach a high point of 6.4 percent in 1975/76. In the late 1990s, it had fallen to 4.5 percent of national income.

Under Labour, it rose again to over 6 percent of national income. But this includes the huge sums channelled to private contractors for new school buildings—between 1998 and 2009 schools capital spending increased by 12.9 percent per year—and the additional expenditure on rolling out the state-funded but privately controlled Academy schools programme, paying millions to consultants and sponsorship companies.

The IFS states that “education spending as a share of national income will fall from 6.2% in 2010-11 to 4.6% by 2014-15. This would return it to a level last seen in 1999-2000, which in turn was the lowest level since the mid-1960s.”

These projections, bleak as they are, remain predicated on some highly contentious economic assumptions, chief amongst which concerns the government’s own groundlessly optimistic forecasts for the growth of the economy and projections of spending.

These cuts will be made at a time when, “Over the period covered by the 2010 Spending Review, the state-funded school population in England is expected to grow from 6.95 million in 2010-11 to 7.14 million children by 2014-15. Furthermore, the education leaving age will be gradually increased from 16 to 18 starting in 2013... As a result, the declines in education

spending over the next few years will be spread over an increasing population, so that resources per head will probably decline by even more than total spending.”

The report points out that, until now, “There has been substantial growth in the numbers of teaching assistants and other support staff, with the former more than tripling from 60,000 in 1997 to reach over 190,000 by 2010. The number of teachers grew by 12% between 1997 and 2010 (rising from 400,000 to 450,000).”

But in the era of austerity and increasing school populations, even this influx of low-paid support staff to compensate for a lack of teachers is a thing of the past.

Labour’s changes to education—privatisation and de-skilling in the classroom—paved the way for the attacks mounted by the current government. Now, in opposition, Labour is lending its support for the government assault. Last month, Stephen Twigg, the new education spokesman for Labour, announced that his party fully backs the setting up of “Free Schools”.

Free Schools are state funded, but privately controlled. Despite claims to address social and educational deprivation in the inner cities, the first of these schools to open in September cater to a proportionally wealthier intake. They are free from local authority control and have greater powers over the teaching curriculum and pupil admissions, as well as staff pay and conditions, than the academy schools, which were first established under the Labour administration of Tony Blair and are now enthusiastically being expanded by the government.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact