

UK: Privatisation agenda causing overcrowded schools and poor-quality education

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Britain's schools face a serious shortage of places over the next two years. The shortfall is estimated to reach 256,000 places in the 2014/2015 academic year, according to a report published by the government's National Audit Office this month.

Schools already face overcrowding problems. A fifth of schools are full or at overcapacity after a 5 percent drop in places between 2004 and 2010. The number of infant classes with more than 31 children has doubled, from 23,200 in 2007 to 47,300 in 2012.

Of the predicted missing school places, 16,000 are in secondary schools and 240,000 are in primary schools, of which 37 percent are in London. As the school system shows increasing signs of strain, the number of places required is predicted to rise further beyond 2015.

Extra places are required due to a lack of funds, a 22 percent birth rate surge during the past decade and a 16 percent increase in children starting school.

Further education is also being affected, as half of all sixth forms will be forced to end some courses due to cuts being imposed in September. Fifteen percent budget reductions will be made during the next three years, according to research conducted by the Association of School and College Leaders.

They also calculated that schools running sixth forms (further education for 16-18-year-olds) with fewer than 200 students would be unviable—around half of sixth forms are threatened with closure.

The government insisted that free schools—state-funded but privately run outside of Local Education Authority control—would alleviate the lack of school places, but the report exposes the falsity of these claims. Only 9,000 primary school places will be provided by the 45 free schools established last year.

The undermining of public education is being accompanied by attacks on teachers. A three-year wage freeze is in place, and the government's attack on pensions has seen teachers lose an estimated 12 percent of their pay.

The teacher training agency reported a 6.3 percent fall in trainee teachers this year, as part of government plans to de-skill the profession and shift teacher training out of universities and into schools. This accompanies the adoption of curricula at all levels of the education system based on learning by rote memorisation, which requires no teaching skills.

Last summer, Education Secretary Michael Gove removed the legal requirement for schools to hire teachers with Qualified Teacher Status. As a consequence, one in ten teachers in free schools have no teaching qualification. Half of free schools surveyed by the government employed at least one unqualified teacher.

This includes a head teacher of Pimlico Primary free school in Westminster, London, who has no teaching experience. The head teacher, Annaliese Briggs, was previously a deputy director of the right-wing think-tank Civitas, where she worked on the national curriculum for primary schools.

Briggs has announced that she will ignore the national curriculum and follow the teaching methods developed by American academic Eric Hirsch, based on the memorisation of lists of facts.

In an indication of the social interests benefiting from the introduction of free schools, Pimlico Primary is owned by the charity Future, founded by venture capitalist and education minister Lord John Nash. Lord Nash co-founded Sovereign Capital, a firm that made

£73 million from government contracts through workfare schemes and has donated around £300,000 to the Conservative Party in recent years.

Nash founded Future to promote the transition to academy schools. These were introduced by the previous Labour government and are similar to free schools but run by private non-profit companies or charities without private ownership.

There has been a tenfold growth in the number of academy schools since 2010, and they now constitute more than half of all schools. Many schools are being compelled to become academies by central government diktat.

Parents and teachers at Roke primary school in Croydon, England, are being denied the legally required consultation over the conversion of their school to academy status. A leaked letter written by Nash revealed that formal consultation will only begin *after* the decision has been taken by the Department for Education (DfE.)

The school's chair of governors told parents "at the meeting [with the DfE] we said 'Don't you think you should wait until the Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, the official UK body for inspecting schools] monitoring visit takes place?' They said 'No, we want to move now...and if you do not agree we will get the local authority to fire you, all of you, all the governors. If the local authority don't do it, we will. We will put in our own board of governors who will do what we say.' "

A school in Birmingham is similarly being threatened with having its board of governors removed if it doesn't convert, despite improving standards at the school. Some schools have already had their boards of governors removed for resisting the government's plans.

More than 94 percent of teachers and parents at Downhill primary school in Tottenham, north London, opposed the dictated conversion to academy status. When the board of governors refused to accede, they were dismissed by Gove, who used powers contained in the new Academies Act. Gove feared that a dangerous precedent would be set if parents continued to protest the closure and the school governors carried out their threat to take legal action.

This running down of public education and hasty mass conversion to academies is part of the

government's agenda for the eventual transfer of the entire education system to the private sector.

The recently leaked memo outlining plans to sell academies into private ownership explains the haste with which they have been introduced and the pressure placed on schools to convert.

These policies are creating widespread hostility amongst teachers towards Gove and the entire government, as was partially expressed at the recent round of teachers' union conferences.

Conference delegates of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers recently passed a vote of no confidence in Michael Gove, denouncing his "abject failure to improve education or treat teachers, parents and pupils with respect."

At the National Union of Teachers annual conference last weekend, delegates also passed a motion of no confidence in Gove and called for a boycott of school inspections by Ofsted and the resignation of the chief inspector.

However, the unions are actively collaborating with the government's agenda and have no intention of organising a genuine struggle in defence of public education, confining protests to regional one-day strikes beginning in June, with the vague threat of a national one-day strike before Christmas!

The author recommends:

UK teaching unions signal no resistance to cuts
Oppose the privatisation of education
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