

UK Tories step up attacks on school education

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The UK government's spending review on public sector funding in November aimed to save more than £20 billion in public finances as part of the government's austerity agenda across health, housing, social services and the education sector.

In education, the main "reform" to be rolled out over the course of this parliament is a new funding formula for schools. The purported aim is "fairer funding" for schools, but the reality is another package of cuts to education and services.

Inequality in funding for schools has existed in one form or another for decades and has escalated over the past decade through the process of "academisation" and the creation of "free schools". Academies and free schools are free from control of Local Education Authorities, funded directly by central government and not bound by national teaching pay and work agreements. These have systematically taken public funding away from the state sector and handed it directly to private companies.

Chancellor George Osborne announced that allocation of school funding would be set by a national rate. This rate will be determined on an age-weighted pupil unit (AWPU). The government's schools revenue report for 2016-2017 lays out a single rate for primary-age pupils, which must be at least £2,000. There will also be different rates for key stage 3 (aged 11-14) and key stage 4 (14-16), with a minimum of £3,000 for each.

A 2014 government report set an AWPU of £2,880 for primary, £3,950 for key stage 3 and £4,502 for key stage 4. This shows that projections per pupil have been significantly reduced, by almost 30 percent. In addition, the absence of a fixed amount, as in previous reports, means that the minimum rate will not meet the needs of many schools nationally.

Teachers' unions note that the overall national picture is a forecast fall of 8 percent in real terms to

school budgets.

According to the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, "Some schools could face extra budget cuts of up to 2 percent a year under government plans. Furthermore, where the funding is coming from is unclear. Officials at the Department for Education...are understood to be considering finding extra cash for low-funded schools by imposing annual 2 per cent cuts on schools in the areas that currently receive the most money".

The cut in real-term school funding comes as the accumulation of budgetary debts by many schools has risen dramatically, and is forecast to escalate over the new tax year as previous "reforms" are imposed from April.

The *TES* found that borrowing by schools in 137 local authorities increased from £20 million in 2013 to £56.7 million in 2015. A freedom of information enquiry for the financial years 2013-2014, and up to the end of November 2015, showed that since 2014 the average permitted deficit per school, for indebted schools, has almost doubled to £122,828.

The impact of cuts is hitting educational support services—with the Local Government Association warning of £600 million being taken from budgets for services such as speech therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, music and checks on staff.

As funding for schools has been squeezed, teachers have suffered cuts in pensions and been hit by the imposition of performance-related pay. These attacks provoked widespread opposition. But a unified response was prevented by the teachers' unions channelling opposition into exerting pressure, first on the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, and now on the Conservative government, to enter negotiations.

The pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party, have played

a critical role. National Union of Teachers (NUT) deputy general secretary Kevin Courtney is a leading figure in the Socialist Teachers Alliance and is backed by the SWP.

Over the past five years, resounding votes for strike action have been returned in ballots. In response, any action organised by the unions has been token, with occasional one-day stoppages. Despite rhetoric by the two main teaching unions, the NUT and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), about organising a “unified campaign”, only the most limited action was held. National strikes have been cancelled at the 11th hour in return for “discussions”, allowing the agenda of the government to be implemented.

Teachers are leaving the profession in droves due to the intolerable conditions they face, while the large rise in pupil numbers adds to budgetary pressures. The annual school census shows numbers rising across the state school system—up by 2.1 percent in primary and 0.1 percent in secondary—to a total of 8.4 million pupils. This is an increase of about 200,000 children in two years.

The government claims that £5 billion was allocated to local authorities in education funding from 2010, with even more being offered over the current parliament. However, this has not resulted in any improvement in the conditions teachers work under. From 2010 to 2015, the number of classes containing over 30 children in primary schools rose. The 100,800 pupils now in oversized classes represent an increase of 8 percent, compared with 2014. The number has more than doubled since 2012, when there were about 47,000 infants in classes of more than 30. In 2008, the figure was fewer than 25,000. Such increases in class sizes damage children’s standard of education.

In secondary schools, the picture is no better. The government predicts a 20 percent rise in pupil numbers over the course of the next decade. By 2024, nearly 3.3 million pupils are expected to be attending state-funded secondary schools, compared with just over 2.7 million in 2015, a rise of 547,000.

Teachers are expected to raise standards and results with stretched resources and rising class sizes. Furthermore, these conditions are being ignored in relation to teacher pay targets. The “Performance Management” targets set by head teachers and

governors are increasingly tougher and in some cases impossible to achieve.

A recent report revealed that £1.3 billion is spent annually on supply teachers in England, as staff retention becomes harder and the number of teachers entering the profession falls.

Lucy Powell, Labour Party shadow education secretary, said that schools face “chronic shortages” of teachers and blamed the government for “talking down the profession.”

Powell’s claims expunge the role played by the Labour Party and the trade unions, who, prior to the Tories coming to power, began implementing the changes that have brought the profession to a breaking point and laid the basis for the eventual privatisation of state education.



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