

# Military units established in UK state schools

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Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has announced that new army cadet units will be allocated to 150 state schools. The announcement, made at last week's conference of the ruling Conservatives, is shaped by an agenda to escalate militarism, war and austerity. Fallon said the scheme would give young cadets "the skills and confidence they need to thrive."

The first of an initial 25 units was launched on October 4 at Rockwood Academy in east Birmingham. Rockwood Academy, formerly Park View School, was at the centre of the highly dubious "Trojan Horse" investigation into allegations of an Islamist takeover of academy schools in Birmingham—England's second largest city. At the time, Ofsted, the official schools inspectorate, downgraded Park View from outstanding to inadequate, saying it was failing to safeguard pupils from extremist influence.

Rockwood, Fallon said, was "a phoenix from the ashes of a Trojan horse school that is now instilling British values, instead of promoting religious segregation."

According to its website, Rockwood Academy, run by CORE Education Trust, has become one of the latest schools to join the Cadet Expansion Programme (CEP). Gary Newbrook, a Contingent Commander who is based permanently at Rockwood Academy, said, "The Combined Cadet Force is designed to instil values in young people that will help them get the most out of their lives, and to contribute to their communities and country."

Ofsted has upgraded Rockwood to "good" and praised the school in its latest report for how "fundamental British values are promoted highly effectively."

Attempts made previously to get such schemes embedded into schools met with little success. Troops to Teachers, set up in June 2013 by the Tories, had little uptake with only 28 qualifying out of a target of 2,000.

Currently, there are about 300 school cadet units across the UK, but fewer than 100 in the state sector with more than two-thirds in private schools.

According to the Rockwood website, the government remains on course to achieve its manifesto target of creating 500 cadet units in schools by March 2020. Fallon supported this target, stating that "the Armed Forces provide the most apprenticeships... I am setting a target to deliver 50,000 apprenticeships over this Parliament."

One of the ways in which the army is pushed in schools is through careers days, where they put on an attractive show designed to appeal to all levels of academic ability but particularly those for whom school is a struggle.

Applications for pupils to join the army are accepted at the age of fifteen-and-a-half, and military training can start at sixteen, either at Harrogate Army Foundation College in Yorkshire, or Welbeck Army Defence sixth-form College in Loughborough. The UK is the only European Union country to permit 16-year-olds to join up and start military training. According to human rights organization Child Soldiers International (CSI), only 17 other countries, including Zambia and El Salvador, allow it. In June, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child asked the government to "reconsider its active policy of recruitment of children into the armed forces and ensure that recruitment practices do not actively target persons under the age of 18 and ensure that military recruiters' access to schools be strictly limited."

Annual events such as the November Armistice—commemorating the end of the First World War—are used in schools to promote the military rather than the traditional reflection on the huge loss of lives in conflicts since the 1914-18 war.

Militarisation of education complements the government's "PREVENT strategy" and "Channel"

programme. Since July 2015, teachers have been legally obliged to report any suspected “extremist” behaviour to police. This has turned teachers into a spying agency for the authorities, with children as young as four being referred to police.

ForcesWatch, a nonprofit founded in 2010, aims to scrutinise the ethics of armed forces recruitment practices and challenge efforts to embed militarist values in civilian society. Coordinator Emma Sangster told the *Guardian*, “Recruitment is a process, it’s not a single event.” During visits to school, armed forces recruiters, “drip feed things of interest to children of school age. They sanitise what conflict involves, and also glamorise it. They focus on adventure, which young people are desperate for.”

Rachel Taylor, CSI programme manager, says that the risks children bear in the forces may be greater than if they were to enlist later. A study by CSI and ForcesWatch showed that those who joined at 16 were twice as likely to be killed in Afghanistan as those who joined at 18 or older. Taylor says, “This is because they’re channelled into the most dangerous roles when they’re recruited... So, although the Ministry of Defence always says ‘it’s not dangerous to join at 16 because you aren’t deployed until you’re 18’, our response is ‘it’s your age when you enlist that determines the degree of risk you face over your whole career.’”

The Labour Party is not opposed in principle to the recruitment into the armed forces of children. In his response to Fallon’s announcement, Clive Lewis—until last week Labour’s shadow defence secretary—made no mention of the fate of thousands of young people who are being dragooned into the war machine. Instead, Lewis attacked Fallon’s conference speech from the right, on the basis that government cost-cutting, “weakened and demoralised our Armed Forces, leaving them poorly-equipped, over-stretched, under-paid and too often living in squalid conditions.” Lewis railed against the decision not to use British steel to build armaments.



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