

UK education funding cuts bring schools to breaking point

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The Conservative government's education policy is aimed at the dismantling the state school system. This involves fragmenting funding for schools through privatisation of school services and providers via the Academies and Free Schools programme. These schools are state-funded, but privately run.

The slashing of funding has led education authorities in one southern England county to consider drastic measures. In West Sussex, headteachers are considering a four-day week, as a direct consequence of a lack of funding.

According to the *Guardian*, headteachers at “every primary, secondary and special school in the county have written to parents saying all the obvious cuts to school spending have already been made. Now they are considering ‘modifying school hours’ as a last-ditch attempt to cut costs.”

It is estimated that schools in West Sussex will require a £20 million emergency injection of funds next April just to keep them afloat.

The crisis in West Sussex exposes the dire situation facing schools and colleges throughout the UK. Schools are being encouraged by the government to find any possible way of saving money. Support staff have been cut and teachers have seen a rise in staff leaving posts and not being replaced. As a result, schools are now raising class sizes and in some cases are denying pay progression to hold on to funds.

The *Guardian* reported, “Other measures being proposed include reduced spending on books and IT, and a more basic curriculum. Although these may seem like future proposals some schools have already taken those steps and still need to find more savings.”

The crisis is summed up in the situation facing George Green's school in London's Isle of Dogs in the east end of the city. The *Guardian* reported that due to

a lack of funding, the school was forced to cut 30 support staff roles this year out of a total of 100—18 of those through redundancies. Headteacher Jill Baker said, “We'd never had so many goodbye speeches... it was heartbreaking.”

The fact that many schools are now consumed with how to “balance the books”, is an indictment of an education system increasingly beholden to the market.

The Department for Education (DoE) claims the government is committed to introducing a national funding formula so all schools are fairly funded. It stated, “[W]e have protected the schools budget so that, as pupil numbers increase, so will the amount of money for our schools—in 2016-2017 that will total over £40bn, the highest on record.”

In March 2016, former chancellor George Osborne's budget included what was claimed to be a “fairer” funding formula for schools—to start from March 2017.

The reality is that the new funding system will only exacerbate already squeezed budgets, with few local authorities benefitting from increased funding. Instead, the policy's function is to redistribute already existing budgets, with no increase in overall expenditure on education.

Even this policy has been suspended, with new education minister, Justine Greening, announcing there would be a one-year delay to the formula. The government said it would respond to its previous consultation on funding by the end of autumn, with the planned reform delayed until 2018-2019.

While state schools are being starved of funds, Theresa May's first domestic policy after taking over as prime minister was the creation of new grammar schools based on selection. Some £50 million is to be allocated to fund expansion. Within days of May's speech, five councils have already drawn up plans to

open new grammar schools.

A recent publication by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), “English schools will feel the pinch over the next five years”, gives a lie to the government’s claims that it is overseeing a burgeoning education budget. The IFS highlights the attacks that are still to come on education. It found “over the last parliament education capital spending fell by 34 percent in real-terms.” The picture is not going to improve for schools and students, with the report noting, “school spending per pupil,” is “likely to fall by around 8% in real terms between 2014–15 and 2019–20.” It will be the first time since the mid-1990s that school spending has fallen in real terms.

The positions of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are barely different. Both have formally committed to protecting the age 3–19 education budget. However, according to the Nuffield Foundation Labour’s plans will lead to a “real-terms cuts to school spending per pupil of 7 percent between 2015–16 and 2019–20.” This increases to 9 percent if increases in National Insurance and pension contributions are considered.

Across the age 3-19 system, problems caused by a depletion in funding continue unabated.

Primary school education is being systematically deprived of the required funding. Last autumn, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) surveyed more than 1,000 school leaders about budgets. Eight out of 10 of those surveyed were in primaries. It found almost two thirds had balanced their budgets only by making significant cuts or using surpluses, and 7 percent had already set a deficit budget. Almost half had cut the numbers or hours of teaching assistants. A similar proportion thought their budgets would be untenable by 2017-18.

Education spending is being cut across the board. Conservative government spending on Further Education (FE) and sixth form fell by 14 percent in real terms in the past five years, with even larger cuts to come in the next parliament.

In sixth form colleges, cuts have led to colleges dropping courses and there is a push to amalgamate FE institutions and sixth form colleges. This would lead to increased class sizes and redundancies.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) held a campaign against these changes. In March, its members

in sixth form colleges held a one-day strike. The NUT reported, “The strike forced the government to think again... they have agreed to that funding for 16-19 education will be protected in cash terms for the next four years.”

The reality is that the NUT’s token action changed nothing, with the union’s own web site stating, “Taking inflation into account, however, this is still likely to mean a real terms cut of 8 percent over the next four years.”

At the Labour conference in September, new Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner pledged to bring back the Educational Maintenance Allowance for students in further education. This was removed by the Tories in 2011.

Rayner said, “We are the party of comprehensives [state schools], of the Open University”, but neglected to mention Labour’s central role in the privatisation of education through the academy system that has exacerbated the current funding crisis.



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