

UK schools decimated by funding cuts

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Across the UK, teachers are drawing attention to the impact of the Conservative government's slashing of funding to schools.

The government had pledged to protect school spending, but this was a façade. Successive UK governments have failed to stop the austerity cuts on schools and the Conservatives' proposed fairer funding formula is a further attack on the education system. A desperate situation has been created as cash-strapped schools look to face even further cuts from proposed funding reforms.

The National Audit Office (NAO) reports that schools faced £3 billion in spending cuts and a forecast from the Institute for Fiscal Studies said this equated to an 8 percent real-term cut to funding. This means that schools face the worst reduction in funding since the mid-1990s.

The situation is so dire that MPs recently debated the schools funding crisis. At the Education Select Committee on January 31, Minister of State for Schools Nick Gibb admitted that 5,500 schools are on the funding "floor."

This was in stark contrast to previous comments by the Education Secretary Justine Greening who claimed that "schools were already receiving record levels of funding. We recognise that schools are facing cost pressures, which is why we will continue to provide advice and support to help them use their funding in cost-effective ways, including improving the way they buy goods and services, so they get the best possible value for their pupils."

Greening's response covers up the truth that schools will be forced to find detrimental ways to cope with the coming cuts on spending. Pressures of funding are compromising the education of every child, with schools being treated as businesses. The most expensive part of a school's budget is teachers' pay. School head teachers will ultimately be forced to decide

between allocating funding for staff or resources.

This will only exacerbate the existing crisis. Cuts in funding have already led to a desperate situation where class sizes have increased substantially.

There are many cases across the UK where, even before further attacks take place, schools are struggling and are already considering extreme measures to survive. Schoolchildren face the prospect of a four-day week in the county of West Sussex, and the same is now being considered in the north-west county of Cheshire because of a shortage in funding.

School principals from Cheshire have warned that some subjects could be scrapped, while teaching assistants and mental health support workers could face redundancy.

While public education faces this crisis, Prime Minister Theresa May has nevertheless pledged that schools will take on a larger role in dealing with mental health issues. This is due to cuts of at least £600 million to mental health services since 2010. Previously paid for by central and local government funding, schools will have to pay for these additional responsibilities out of their own budgets.

This attack on school budgets is not sustainable, with school leaders forced to consider unprecedented measures. The BBC reported Denis Oliver, head teacher at Holmes Chapel Comprehensive School in Cheshire, saying he was investigating the possibility of "having children working at home with their teachers online as virtual support, [thereby] saving on heating, lighting, cleaning and transport costs. We are looking at everything."

He added, "Class sizes will rise, services for children with high needs will drastically reduce, school libraries may have to close. It's draconian. It will destroy some schools."

This is not an isolated case but the emerging reality nationwide, with the *Independent* reporting, "40

percent of small rural schools are set to lose funding.”

The impact is being felt across the board. North Devon schools are likely to go bankrupt due to proposed funding changes. Member of Parliament for Liverpool West, Stephen Twigg, said, “80 percent of schools in Liverpool are set to have budget cuts.” In the area of Kirklees in West Yorkshire, only one school is set to benefit from the new funding formula changes, with the rest losing money. In Oldham, each school is set to lose £438 per pupil.

Not only are schools worried about the coming changes, but growing numbers of secondary schools are over-spending and deficits are growing. Their average deficit during 2015/16 increased from £246,000 to £326,000. *Schools Week* magazine reported, “Schools are now at the point where they have cut all they can from non-staff budgets.”

In this situation, the only solution left to head teachers is to cut money from staffing.

The government’s strategy in response to funding problems in Academy schools has been to intervene to give them notices to improve. There is no evidence that this process has helped improve a school’s financial situation. In fact, the NAO found that 70 out of 322 academy trusts ended back on financial concern lists even after receiving Education Funding Agency (EFA) support.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), which asked 1,000 schools about their funding situation, substantiates these statistics. They found that 71 percent of head teachers polled were only able to balance their budgets by making cuts or dipping into reserves. Seventy-two percent of head teachers fear budgets will be unsustainable by 2019 and 85 percent save money by spending less on new equipment.

The greatest cost pressures on schools, according to head teachers, are government changes, which have passed the costs of employing staff on to schools; the decline in local authority services; and the abolition of a central government grant that enables councils to support schools with pupils who have mental health issues.

According to the NAHT, almost 80 percent of schools are providing support for children with mental health issues from general school budgets. Schools are “stepping in where cuts in health and social care funding have failed to meet the growing demand for

support.”

As wider cuts to social care and children’s services continue, schools have to deal with the effects by taking over the care systems that have been wiped out. This situation only exacerbates the school funding situation and directly affects the care of children, with fully funded and dedicated services no longer available.

Schools are forced to cut hours of speech therapy sessions, and specialist staff who used to work in areas such as drugs, gangs and counselling have disappeared or had their hours cut. Head teachers complain that there is no help outside school for children with mental health issues and schools are now being asked to take on even heavier burdens, but without extra funding.

Schools cannot afford family liaison workers, yet are being judged on the attendance records of children. Head teachers are cutting training budgets at a time when the government has changed every course and every exam curriculum. Money for resources and training for these courses cannot be found by some schools. Some head teachers have followed a policy of not replacing staff where they do not have to.

Parents are increasingly being asked to contribute to school funding. One example is Beechen Cliff, a state school in Bath, which sent a letter to all parents—several years before the new funding formula came in—asking for a regular voluntary financial contribution. Noting the “bleak governmental funding future,” it said that maintaining existing standards “will only be possible with help and support.” The letter continued, “At Beechen Cliff education is free but, if parents are willing to give a fraction of that money, we could achieve so much more.” It added, “We are asking ALL families for a voluntary contribution of £30, £20 or £10 per month to the new Top-up Scheme.”

Many schools are heading towards bankruptcy and will be forced to go to the wall. The aim of the government’s attacks is to force schools to become businesses that compete, with the privatisation of school-age education the goal.



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