

Education Fightback forum hears special needs teacher: “A 30 percent increase in class size with the same level of staffing”

Our reporters
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Julia is a special needs teacher in southern England. She told the forum:

I have worked as a Special Educational Needs teacher for the last eight years and the impact of austerity has never been more palpable.

Year in, year out, we have had an increase in class sizes. Our maximum limit increases constantly as the demand for places has skyrocketed.

I have had a 30 percent increase in my class size in the last three years, but am left with the same level of staffing, which has a huge impact on workload. We have long waiting lists as there is nowhere for children with very complex needs, both medically and behaviourally, to attend. Hundreds of special schools were shut down over the past 20 years. As these children cannot be supported in the mainstream school setting, they are being squeezed into the very small numbers of special schools left.

Like all schools across the country, we have had 1.5 percent cut in funding year on year. This can amount to up to £30,000 per year, which is the cost of a teacher or two teaching assistants. We have lost our school nurses, as in virtually every special school across the country, due to National Health Service cuts.

Now we have to fund additional TAs to do the nurses' work with minimal training. This is for children who come to school on oxygen tanks, with catheters. There are dozens with severe epilepsy, who need rescue medication regularly, as well as children with severe autism and ADHD [Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder].

Almost one-third of our children are tube fed and very few have language skills. So, as a teacher I spend a considerable amount of my time tube feeding, dealing

with seizures, toileting and personal care. The time I have left to provide specialist intervention on communication and physical development is very limited, meaning children are not able to make the progress they are capable of making.

NHS and local council cuts have led to cuts in equipment such as mobility aids. These are now mostly funded through charities. Parents have to bid for the equipment they need and prove themselves worthy of a handout.

Respite care, which was commonly available a few years ago to give parents a break, hardly exists and is stringently means-tested. There are one to two places in my whole year group, compared to the 10 to 12 places a couple of years ago.

This has meant increased child protection interventions as parents are struggling to manage with the complex demands of their children, many of whom suffer sleep deprivation. On top of this, there is the anxiety of academisation.

Every school in the country has to become an academy within the next four years. The marketisation that has taken place on the campuses has impacted the entire education system. It has been especially difficult for special needs schools. Conversion to academy status is not as profitable in special needs as other sectors. So special schools forced to become academies have no private backers, but the councils have sold off most of their support services to the private sector and fund nothing.

This leaves these schools in limbo, struggling to fund the services they need. We have one Speech and Language therapist who is funded for one day a week to work with 102 children with speech, language and

communication difficulties.

Yesterday, based on research that poor children in the south get better education than their counterparts in the north, the government said it will increase investment in that area of the country. It's a paltry amount—about £140 million. But the government's so-called solution will be to rob Peter to pay Paul. They will take money from poor children in Hackney, supposedly to help those in Leeds. Poor children everywhere will suffer. This is so damaging because social inequality and poverty is at the root of the difficulties many children confront in schooling.

Several areas in the country piloted schemes over the past year offering free school meals to children over the school holidays, as tens of thousands were literally being starved because their families are too poor to feed them. This is the true indicator of why children do poorly in deprived areas—austerity, unemployment and social deprivation. They do not even have enough food to eat to nourish their little brains to function.

Unless the source of social inequality, the profit system, is abolished, the future for young children and especially its most vulnerable layers will not change.

This is a political task and it begins here, in this forum. A unified political campaign of the working class, students, lecturers and teachers against capitalism is the only way forward. It requires the development of rank-and-file committees, for working people and students, to discuss, plan and direct opposition. It must be independent of the unions who are accomplices in this offensive.

I am in the National Union of Teachers, nominally a “left” union. It has sabotaged and isolated every effort of the teachers to oppose the cuts, attacks on pensions, workload, performance pay and privatisation. We need to have discussion on how we can mobilise our own independent strength, and this forum is an important step in that direction.



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