

UK education system breaking apart after decade of cuts

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Many UK schools returning after the Easter break face an unprecedented crisis. A decade of cuts to education funding are having such an impact that some teachers and pupils are cleaning classrooms, while others are taking pay cuts to save ancillary staff jobs.

Shortfalls in funding across the education sector have led to huge budget deficits, with head teachers being forced to make desperate decisions about how to keep their schools running.

So dire is the situation that last term five teachers at Furzedown primary school in Wandsworth, south London, volunteered to up to a £7,000-a-year pay cut in order to save the jobs of two of their teaching assistant colleagues.

Headteacher Monica Kitchlew-Wilson was forced to ask older pupils to clean classrooms after one of the school's cleaners moved jobs and there was not enough money to replace her. The head even drafted in her husband, a trained plumber, to help. The school is buying fewer books and reducing investment in IT, as well as on services for children with behavioural and learning difficulties.

Schools are relying on teachers and parents to finance state education and plug deficits. One in six state schools sent letters to the families of around 1.4 million pupils asking for contributions of £20 a month or more. Some schools have requested the setting up of direct debit payments or for families to make one-off contributions—in some cases up to £600. More than 1,000 schools across England have turned to crowd funding on the internet.

Fundraising by school communities has been used to pay for new technology and revamp school playgrounds, none of which would have otherwise been possible. Donations of equipment, such as crayons, paper and glue sticks, are commonplace, with head teachers seeking the support of local communities.

A survey published last week by the NASUWT education union found that 20 percent of teachers were spending their own money on basic classroom supplies and nearly half surveyed were paying for food, clothes and basic toiletries for poor pupils. One teacher said she had paid out £5,000 on

classroom supplies in recent years.

Cuts have hit the most vulnerable children. Disabled children at Kings Heath, a school in Birmingham, were forced to leave after the school considered scrapping provision for them due to budget cuts. Chair of Governors Penny Colbourne said: “We are being asked to make impossible choices and impossible decisions.” School head Shirley Hanson said she was “distressingly” having to consider closing the specialist resource base for children with physical disabilities.

Funding per pupil in England continues to fall, with a further 3 percent drop to come in the next period, a study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) revealed. This would lead to a £130 cut for every pupil in primary school and a £170 cut for each secondary school pupil. Most schools will not be able to cope with this further funding reduction. The effect on the standard of education on offer will be devastating.

Analysis of official figures by campaign group, the School Cuts Coalition, showed that the shortfall in funding reached £5.4 billion across England's schools between 2015 and 2018. To put this in perspective, in the county of Yorkshire the sum amounts to more than £481 million—with 90 percent of schools affected—and a £66 million shortfall in the city of Leeds alone.

Most secondary schools, and almost 30 percent of primary schools, are run as Academies—publicly funded by central government though privately controlled. Academies were an initiative of the Blair Labour government in 2000.

Many Academies are run as chains, whereby one Academy trust runs more than one school. To offset the cuts, many Academy trusts are considering changing the terms and conditions of their workers to save money.

One academy chain in Yorkshire, the Bradford Diocesan Academies Trust (BDAT), which runs 13 schools, launched a consultation on changes to terms and conditions last autumn.

The Trust aims to add an extra month on the notice period that teachers can give when leaving the trust. Currently,

conditions state that there are only three dates throughout the school year that staff can give notice to leave. This change would “give the trust the power to give staff notice in mid-April, forcing them to leave at the end of the summer term.” As a result, teachers would not be paid over the summer months, saving the trust thousands of pounds. If this is passed, other academies will follow suit and use the cuts to force through other changes to working conditions.

At the same time, some chains have been accused of squandering hundreds, even thousands of taxpayers’ money, both legally and illegally.

While slashing the overall education budget successive Tory-led governments have found millions of pounds for academies to take over schools and set up multi-academy trusts.

According to a *Schools Week* investigation, since 2013 the Department for Education allocated more than “£126 million in sponsor capacity funding.” However, *Schools Week* found that during the 2016–17 academic year, after £5 million was handed out, “six trusts paid a combined £195,334 have not taken on any new schools.”

The report notes that “four trusts that received funding in 2015–16 are yet to expand. Southmoor Academy Trust, Brighter Futures, the Keys Federation and Zest Academy Trust received £293,045 between them.” This is taxpayer’s money that could be the difference between a school staying open or closing.

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This revelation follows a previous *Schools Week* investigation in 2017 which exposed that millions of pounds were wasted in the creation of “northern hubs” but nothing actually materialised.

Other high profile cases, such as Bright Tribe and Wakefield City Academy Trusts, which received almost £1.5 million between them, have collapsed.

A BBC1 *Panorama* documentary shown last month, “The Academy Schools Scandal,” exposed financial corruption on a criminal scale in some Academy chains—but the perpetrators have not faced any criminal investigation.

That educators are placed in this intolerable situation is an indictment of the teaching trade unions, who have done nothing to mobilise their membership in opposition to the tide of cuts to education. The National Education Union (NEU), the biggest teachers’ union, correctly declares that schools are facing a “national emergency.” Teachers are only too aware of this, with NEU members repeatedly returning strike ballots to fight back. In opposition, the NEU and others are suppressing this willingness to fight. Instead the unions call on their members to note school cuts on a website as “Politicians care what voters think, but we’ve got

to make sure they continue to make them feel the pressure from around the country.”

The last national strike action by UK teachers was to defend their pensions, alongside other public sector workers. These were eventually wound down in 2011 by the unions, so that today teachers and others in the public sector have to pay more and work longer for a smaller pension.

The unions are insisting teachers wait for the election of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government. But Corbyn has made it clear that a Labour government led by him would be fully committed to “fiscal responsibility,” with Labour councils everywhere carrying out millions in budget cuts as they set balanced budgets as instructed by the Labour leader.

Across the country, communities are setting up their own organisations to fight back. This month, parents and their children who attend St Matthew’s Primary School marched through Cambridge to demand action on school funding. Following the march, a rally heard the school will face a £60,000 cut to the school budget in September. The parents have formed the Fund Our Schools campaign group.

The Socialist Equality Party urges all teachers and workers in education to unite with other public sector workers alongside workers in the private sector, both in the UK and internationally. Ongoing strikes by teachers in Poland, who are taking action in defiance of their unions, show the way forward. Central to this fight is the formation of rank-and-file committees in workplaces and local communities independent from and in rebellion against the trade unions, who have collaborated for a decade with the Tory-led Conservative governments as they dismantle public education.



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