UK schools facing bankruptcy during pandemic

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Thousands of UK schools are threatened with bankruptcy, staff redundancies and larger class sizes as they are forced to stay open and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic without extra funding.

Despite educational settings being a major vector for the rising number of coronavirus infections—accounting for 45 percent of new cases—Boris Johnson's Conservative government, backed by the trade unions and opposition Labour Party, insist that schools must remain open. This criminally reckless policy, underpinned by the "herd immunity" strategy, has contributed to a death toll of over 70,000.

According to the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), half the schools in the north west England town of Stockport anticipate going into deficit budgets this year, as they struggle with extra costs incurred by the pandemic. Many schools report their annual supply cover budget has been exhausted in just half a year due to staff absences, either from teachers contracting COVID-19 or quarantining at home after contact with positive cases at school.

General secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Geoff Barton, told the *Guardian*, "Most of a school's budget is spent on staffing, so the inevitable conclusion of having less money is that they have to cut staffing. This increases class sizes and reduces the capacity to deliver pastoral care and provide additional classroom support for pupils who benefit from that. Unless the government acts, one of the legacies of Covid will be yet another funding crisis in education."

The *Guardian* reported that one secondary school in the north west incurred extra COVID-19 related expenses to the tune of £339,000. A term's supply of hand sanitisers cost the unnamed school more than £10,000, bacterial anti-sprays accounted for £3,381, and £4,000 was spent on disposable paper towels.

In theory, schools could apply for government reimbursement to cover some extra costs, but only up to July 2020. The school's headteacher told the *Guardian*, "I have put in a claim to the Department for Education, but as yet have received diddly squat."

The head of Wales High School in Kiveton, South Yorkshire, Giuseppe Di'Iasio, worked over the summer holidays providing covered areas outside so the school's year-groups would have room to separate into their "bubbles" for social distancing.

"We spent our reserves to fund the building work, which has used up in advance all the capital fund money we will get over the next three years, so other improvements will be put on hold," Di'Iasio told the *Guardian* .

"It cost £6,000 to re-design the school and put in one-way systems and distancing, and we had to spend £19,000 on catering facilities so we could serve lunch at seven different venues. We had to spend £2,000 on webcams for staff at home to facilitate remote learning, toilet refurbishment cost £3,500, and hygiene costs have been £13,000. We're looking at spending at least a third of a million pounds out of our £10m budget, but as 80% of our spending is on staff costs, it is actually a sixth of the £2m other spend."

Julia Maunder, the head of another school, Thomas Keble in Eastcombe, told the newspaper, "When I say I need £14,000 to pay for marquees to keep children dry, I should not be made to feel I'm being unreasonable."

The school has triple the national average number of children with special educational needs, which it supports from its budget. This led to a "notice to improve" last year by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. The school only avoided bankruptcy through loans from the agency, voluntary contributions from parents, and staff cuts. The school is again teetering on a budget deficit.

The situation was as grim at Stockport's Mellor

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Primary school. Headteacher Jim Nicholson reported spending £9,500 on supply teachers since the autumn term began. The cost of building adaptations to permit separate class "bubbles" amounted to £1,386. Extra cleaning and hygiene materials totalled £2,738 for a half term, £484 spent on IT for remote learning, and £2,000 on school equipment so children are not sharing.

In addition, the school, which has 225 pupils on roll, did not receive £29,000 allocated for after-school care and outreach work.

"Then there are the hidden costs, such as our metered water bill. On average, children are washing their hands five times more times a day, which will have a significant impact on our bill—which was £3,047 last year," he said. Heating bills will also soar as schools have to be well ventilated during the winter to try and mitigate against high viral load.

The pandemic has accelerated the funding crisis in education, which has suffered decades of cutbacks, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies' "2019 annual report on education spending in England," spending per pupil in England fell in real terms by eight percent between 2009–10 and 2019–20.

A survey by the government school inspectorate Ofsted in 2018-19 found financial pressures were the biggest concern of half the headteachers questioned, and for 80 percent it is one of their three biggest concerns.

Ofsted reported, "Forty-two per cent of primary school headteachers and 48 percent of secondary school headteachers who responded to our survey predicted that their school would be in debt by the end of the 2019–20 budget year."

Like the other education unions, including the National Education Union (NEU), Unite and the GMB, the headteachers' unions have not lifted a finger to mobilise their members in effective action to adequately resource education either in the past or now.

Educators continue to work in unsafe workplaces with the unions doing nothing to protect them. At least 148 education staff have tragically succumbed to the virus.

The unions have put up no fight to ensure a fully resourced safe learning environment during the pandemic, which must include school closures for all but the children of essential workers. A recent article in scientific journal *Nature*, cited several international studies proving that closing schools saves lives.

Last week, the Department for Education announced a "short-term Covid workforce fund" to subsidise supply cover costs for schools and colleges. But to apply, schools must already be in a crisis situation and have 20 percent of staff absent "short-term" or 10 percent "long-term". It stipulates that "Schools will first need to use any existing financial reserves, as we would typically expect when facing unforeseen costs."

According to Schools Week "Officials have not said how much will be available in total" in the fund. Welcoming what amounts to a few crumbs thrown by the government, National Association of Head Teachers general secretary Paul Whiteman said, "We would like to see the government go further, and our continuing discussions with them will focus on this in the coming weeks."

The government, Labour opposition and unions feign concern that children, especially from poorer and disadvantaged families, are losing out, not just in terms of their education but their social development during the pandemic. This is undoubtedly true—but their concern is totally disingenuous.

Labour supported the government's Coronavirus Act, which handed billions to the corporations, along with quantitative easing policies that funnelled hundreds of billions into the stock market. Over £17 billion in lucrative PPE contracts were handed over to the private sector, including cronies of the ruling Conservatives, while hundreds of thousands of workers and young people face joblessness and impoverishment. None of this has been fought by the unions, which have operated as part of a de facto government of national unity with Labour and the Tories.

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