

UK schools in state of disrepair as they reopen to a raging pandemic

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A survey of 1,500 British state school leaders conducted by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) revealed 83 percent do not have sufficient funds to repair dilapidated school buildings. Speaking to the *Observer* newspaper, school leaders complained of leaking ceilings, faulty heating systems, broken windows and inadequate ventilation systems.

The run-down state of Britain's classrooms will exacerbate the already dangerously high risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools.

NAHT head of policy James Bowen commented that the pandemic has "laid bare the scale of the problem". He added, "Issues like ventilation and having enough space suddenly became really important. We were desperately ill-prepared for that. The government's latest advice on ventilation for schools said open as many windows as you can. If your windows are screwed shut because they're not deemed to be safe, or you've got external doors that are faulty, that's a real problem."

The findings of the NAHT survey confirm those of a Department of Education (DfE) study, which found that schools in England alone face a repair bill of £11.4 billion. It concluded that £2.5 billion was needed for electrical and IT repairs, £2 billion for boilers and air-conditioning repairs, and £1.5 billion for mending roofs, windows and walls.

The DfE's estimated cost of £11.4 billion for "remedial work to repair or replace all defective elements" is a near £5 billion increase on the £6.7 billion recommended by the National Audit Office (NAO) as necessary to return all school buildings to a satisfactory condition in 2017. The DfE admitted, "While [the NAO report] was calculated on a slightly different basis, this does demonstrate that the overall condition need in the estate has grown over the last six years".

Spiraling repair bills are a measure of the ruling class's utter disregard for state schoolchildren's wellbeing.

Earlier this month, the unexpected findings of a school project run by the Don Hanson Charitable Foundation shone a light on the consequences.

The Foundation sends out educational materials on different topics to 20,000 UK schools. Over 600 schools received equipment for testing local water sources, as part of the Great British Water Project. Fourteen schools discovered that their water contains lead concentrations five times higher than the safe limit.

This is not an isolated example. Two years ago, 676 state schools were referred to the Health and Safety Executive over concerns that they were not safely managing asbestos in their buildings.

According to the ONS, between 2001 and 2019, at least 305 school workers have died of mesothelioma, a cancer almost exclusively linked with asbestos exposure. A study published in *Environmental Health Scotland* in 2018 found that there were five times more mesothelioma deaths among teachers than would be expected for populations not exposed to the substance.

Parading its indifference to children and educators alike, the DfE report merely "recommends" that fire-sprinklers be fitted in new schools, four years after the horrific Grenfell Tower fire. It only gives "clear guidance" that fire-sprinklers should be installed in new special schools and boarding accommodation, as well as in school buildings with floors higher than 11 metres above ground level, effectively four storeys or higher.

Fire safety design guidance currently has only an "expectation" that new buildings have fire-sprinklers installed and in recent years only one in three new school builds have had fire-sprinklers fitted.

Tilden Watson, head of Zurich Municipal's education section, specialists in school insurance, told the *Guardian*, "By limiting sprinklers to schools above 11 metres, the government is effectively writing off a significant proportion of the school estate. This will create a two-tier

system of safety, which is arbitrary and ill-thought-through. As predominantly single-storey buildings, primary schools will be hardest hit, especially as they already suffer nearly twice the rate of blazes as secondary schools.”

The disastrous state of the UK’s school infrastructure is the result of longstanding government neglect, private profiteering and savage austerity cuts.

School funding was slashed after the 2008 financial crash. As an example, in 2011 the repair budget for schools on Merseyside, including the city of Liverpool, was slashed by more than half, from £130 million to just £61 million. Another 12.5 percent cut followed the next year. Even prior to the crash, in 2006, Liverpool’s schools were £50 million short of what was needed to bring their buildings up to standard and were forced to hold classes in 168 mobile classrooms, up from 40 just one year before.

Overall government capital spending on schools declined by 44 percent between 2009-10 and 2019-20. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has calculated that school funding per pupil in England fell by 9 percent in real terms in the same period, the largest cut in over 40 years.

Increasing numbers of schools are therefore running financial deficits, with many struggling long before the pandemic. The size of the total schools deficit stood at £233.3 million in 2018/19 and rose to £266.4 million in 2019/20—the highest level since records began in 2002/03.

The *Liverpool Echo* reported how on Merseyside alone a total of 74 schools had a combined deficit of £18.5 million in 2019/20, according to DfE figures. That was up from 49 schools in 2018/19, with numbers having already risen sharply upwards from 16 in 2012/13, when comparable figures began. The average deficit per school in 2019/20 was £249,739 and Gateacre secondary school in Belle Vale, Liverpool alone has a deficit exceeding £3 million.

Schools built under Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts, a specialty of the Tony Blair-Gordon Brown Labour governments, are especially laden with backbreaking costs.

Under the terms of a PFI deal, the government or local authority commissions a private firm to build a project using their own capital, with the local authority then paying back enormously inflated costs to the corporations over decades. Liverpool’s Parklands High School in Speke, constructed under a £100 million contract and opened in 2002, still costs Liverpool council £4 million per year despite the school closing in 2014. The city’s

taxpayers must fork out £12,000 per day until 2028.

In total, PFI deals have locked Liverpool authority into approximately £13 million each year in repayments. Sixteen Merseyside schools built under PFI contracts continue to face financial difficulties which negatively impact pupils.

These facts show up the government’s pledge to spend a pathetic £25 million sending CO2 monitors to schools for the contemptible fraud it is. The ruling class will not provide the resources necessary for a minimally acceptable learning environment and standard of safety in normal times, let alone in a pandemic. The decades-long neglect of schools and the abandonment of children and educators to the virus are part of one and the same class policy, which prioritises profits over the basic needs of the vast majority of society.

The point of the monitors, which have yet to arrive in most schools and will do nothing except diagnose a problem everyone already knows exists, is to encourage the fiction that classrooms can be made safe. The reality is that only a combination of school and workplace closures, together with extensive public health measures, testing, tracing and vaccination, working towards the elimination of the virus, can bring an end to the dangers posed by COVID-19.

Such a programme will necessarily bring school workers, students and parents into conflict with the trade unions, who have allowed schools to fall into such disrepair and for their members and the children in their care to be herded back into classrooms at high risk of infection. The fight for the implementation of the necessary safety measures must be organised independently of these organisations.

An Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee has been established to help develop this struggle in Britain, and to assist in the building of a network of rank-and-file committees of educators and parents who oppose the murderous policies of the government and its backers in the trade unions and the Labour Party. We call on all those who agree to contact the Committee today.



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