

UK: Institute of Fiscal Studies reports largest drop in per-pupil schools funding in 40 years

Tom Pearce
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A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) into the funding of UK schools confirms the devastating consequences of a decade of government underfunding, despite claims of spending boosts during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In real terms, the report found that spending per pupil has fallen for the first time since the 1990s, by “9% or about £600 per pupil between 2009–10 and 2019–20.” This is the largest effective cut in over 40 years.

An extra £7.1 billion of funding for schools in England, promised by the government for 2022–23, is being trumpeted as a reversal of the 9 percent fall. However, the IFS report found that “If we account for expected increases in teacher pay, the real terms increase in spending per pupil will be lower, at 6%. Therefore, school spending per pupil in 2022–23 would be no higher in real terms than in 2009–10.”

The impact has been especially hard on the poorest and most vulnerable children.

Since 2011, schools have received a pupil premium payment, introduced by the Conservatives/Liberal Democrats coalition, which grants extra funds to schools for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. These payments have not increased as need has grown.

According to the IFS, “Since 2014–15, spending per pupil has fallen by 4% amongst the most deprived primary schools as compared with a rise of 3% amongst the least deprived primary schools. Amongst secondary schools, the most deprived schools saw a 13% real-terms fall in spending per pupil between 2014–15 and 2018–19, which compares with a 7% fall amongst the least deprived schools.”

Factoring in smaller rises between 2010 and 2015, the most deprived schools have suffered the highest overall fall in spending per pupil since 2009–10. The total funding premium was found to have fallen by about

“25% by 2018–19, taking it back to mid-2000 levels”.

A separate survey this September of 1,500 head teachers by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) union found that 97 percent of all schools “had received insufficient funding to support pupils who had special needs”. Nearly a third of schools have cut higher-level needs services in the last year.

These figures totally expose the lying propaganda from the Conservative government, Labour Party opposition, trade unions and the media that they are keeping schools open during the pandemic for the sake of children’s learning. The ruling class clearly could not care less about providing working-class children with the resources needed for a good education. By comparison, in the last four years, as pupils have seen their funding fall, UK defence spending has risen by £5.3 billion in real terms.

The truth is that schools have been reopened purely as holding pens so that parents can return to work making profits for the corporations, paying back the costs of the pandemic. Now that children are back in the classrooms, the poorest are immediately confronted with more cuts, giving the lie to Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s fraudulent “levelling up” agenda.

Data sourced under the Freedom of Information Act by the *Observer* shows that a government change to how pupil premium funding is calculated—from October 2020 rather than January 2021—will lead to substantial shortfalls in the poorest areas. “Schools in the most deprived 10% of areas in England each enrolled an average of seven extra FSM [free school meals] pupils between October 2020 and January 2021, compared with 2.6 extra FSM pupils at each school in the least deprived locations,” the paper reports. These pupils will not be awarded funding.

Councils have yet to calculate the cost of the

changes, but there is no doubt that they will exacerbate the desperate financial situation for thousands of schools. Education website Schools Week estimates the total loss of funding to be around £125 million.

The IFS report was met with oppositional rhetoric from the teaching unions and the Labour Party. Labour's shadow education secretary Kate Green said, "Conservative cuts have hammered school budgets over the last decade. Children's opportunities have been stripped away as class sizes have soared to record levels and enriching extracurricular activities have been cut back."

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT, commented, "This is at a time when demands on schools have been increasing. There is no escaping the fact that the schools have had and will continue to have to make cuts to provision until this is properly addressed."

But what Labour and the unions describe are the consequences of their own betrayals of school workers' struggles and refusal to seriously oppose government cuts. The unions have bent over backwards to accommodate the cost-cutting agenda of Tory-led governments, waved through by the Labour Party, and have deepened their criminal partnership over the course of the pandemic by supporting the government's reopening of COVID-infested schools. Token campaigns for more funding run by NASWUT and the NEU have been allowed to fall on deaf ears for decades.

The leaders of the education unions made clear in their criticisms of the funding figures that nothing will change in this approach, limiting themselves to offering advice to Johnson's viciously right-wing government.

NAHT leader Whiteman counselled, "A far more ambitious programme of investment is required from the government if schools are going to be able to deliver the education that the current generation of pupils need and deserve."

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said in the same vein, "The government must invest more in our schools and colleges and it has to ensure that funding is put on a more sustainable footing in the future."

Mary Bousted, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), the largest teachers' union in Europe, stated, "If the Government is serious about

making sure no child is left behind, they will show far more urgency and ambition to support and resource schools with their efforts to deliver education recovery."

In fact, the NEU, sitting on enormous anger in its membership, has gone out of its way to offer ongoing support to the Tory government.

Last week, the widely despised education secretary Gavin Williamson was replaced in a government reshuffle by Nadhim Zahawi. This was a transparent manoeuvre by Johnson to use Williamson as a scapegoat for his government's schools policy during the pandemic, presenting the new minister as a fresh start. Bousted's counterpart as NEU joint general secretary Kevin Courtney duly played his part in this fiction, appearing on the BBC to welcome Zahawi into his office. The NEU Twitter account said that Courtney was "Looking forward to working with Nadhim Zahawi and all at DfE to ensure schools and colleges get funding needed to support education recovery for pupils."

The multi-millionaire Zahawi then began his tenure as education secretary by refusing calls to extend free school meals over the holiday period and claiming parents "actually prefer to pay a modest amount" for the scheme.

Defending the social right to high-quality education and social provision, like the fight for safe workplaces through the eradication of COVID-19, requires a political confrontation with Johnson government and its Labour party and trade union aides. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees of educators and all other sections of the working class to organise this struggle. Sign up to the Educators Newsletter and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



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