

# UK school ceiling collapses after a decade of austerity cuts and lifting of safety regulations

Margot Miller  
22 November 2021

Last week, 12 children and one adult were taken to hospital after a school ceiling collapsed at a primary school in London. The London Ambulance service treated a further three people at the scene.

Three fire engines and 20 firefighters attended the incident at Rosemead Preparatory School & Nursery in Dulwich, after the ceiling of a second floor Year 3 classroom caved in on November 15. Luckily, no one sustained serious injury, though one child was detained in hospital under observation, after what must have been a terrifying experience.

The Urban Search and Rescue team were sent to the school and, while staff and pupils were evacuated temporarily, determined that the building “was at no further risk of collapse.”

The other classes in the school resumed as normal for the rest of the day, despite the psychological trauma suffered by all concerned. A mother waiting to pick up her eight-year-old son told the *Daily Mail*, “Fortunately my son was not involved but it must be traumatising to have seen their friends covered in blood.”

Rosemead is a private school for children aged two to 11 years. With 325 children on rolls, annual fees range up to almost £15,000. The school acquired the 156-year-old building in 1974 after a group of parents bought it from the Old Vic theatre.

The Health and Safety Executive have begun “initial inquiries” into what could have been a tragic outcome.

Since the 2008 financial crash, every government department has suffered crippling cuts, including the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Since 2010, the HSE has lost 500 frontline inspectors as part of budget cuts of 50 percent.

Each local authority in the UK, responsible for enforcing building regulations, has been subjected to draconian cuts since 2008. Rosemead Preparatory School is in a district run by Southwark Council. The Labour-run council has implemented tens of millions in cuts after having its funding cut by more than £146 million by central government since 2011.

When Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron took

office in 2010, he implemented a “bonfire of regulations,” relaxing restrictions to create a bonanza for profiteers. Cameron openly pledged to “kill off safety culture”, declaring, “We need to realise, collectively, that we cannot eliminate risks and that some accidents are inevitable.”

The Department for Education advice on standards for school premises in England, last updated March 2015 applies to all schools, including private and local authority-run schools and Academies. It states: “This advice is non-statutory, and has been produced to help recipients understand their obligations and duties in relation to the School Premises Regulations 2012...”

“There are fewer regulations than previously and they are less prescriptive, allowing schools more flexibility in how they use their premises. Many regulations state that provision must be ‘suitable’. This is not precisely defined, but schools must take into account the age, number and sex of pupils, and any special requirements they have, when determining whether provision is suitable.”

Successive governments, including Labour, have subordinated every aspects of society, including the safety of school buildings, to the grotesque bloating of wealth of the billionaires.

· In September, Ford Primary School run by the Horizon Multi Academy Trust in Plymouth suffered a partial collapse of the school hall roof.

· A secondary school in Berkshire suffered a partial roof collapse over a walkway on November 15, 2020. Sandhurst school, with 1,000 pupils on its rolls, was forced to use 10 temporary classrooms. The headteacher said she felt, “Relief of course that nobody was hurt - that just does not bear thinking about.”

· In October 2019, part of the roof and brickwork at St Anne’s Catholic Primary School in Sutton, St Helens collapsed, exposing a classroom to the elements. Fortunately, this occurred during half term so there were no injuries. The *Liverpool Echo* reported “one worried parent said: ‘It’s scary to think what could have happened if they were in school as builders said nobody would have survived

that.”

- On May 10, 2018, a teacher and three pupils, aged between six and seven, suffered minor injuries when part of the ceiling fell in a Year 2 classroom at Nechells Primary School, Birmingham. Nearly 330 sq. m (3,552sq ft) worth of ceilings at the Grade II listed building were replaced.

- Edinburgh Council commissioned an investigation into school building safety after a disastrous collapse of a wall at Oxbgangs Primary School in February 2017, leading to the subsequent closure of 17 schools for checks. The schools were procured under the Public Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

A report published in 2018 following an investigation into the Oxbgangs Primary School collapse led by construction and procurement expert Professor John Cole was damning. It stated: “The fact that no injuries or fatalities to children resulted from the collapse of the gable wall at Oxbgangs School was a matter of timing and luck. Approximately 9 tons of masonry fell on an area where children could easily have been standing or passing through. One does not require much imagination to think of what the consequences might have been if it had happened an hour or so later...”

“The Inquiry has become aware that this was one of five avoidable incidents of external masonry panels failing in strong winds at Scottish schools in the last few years... in all cases it would appear that proper quality control at the time of building could have identified and have rectified the basic defects in construction that led to the failures.

An example of the tearing up of regulations was summed up by Cox who stated, “Despite the significant increasing reliance being placed on the quality assurance by contractors of their own work, there is no formal requirement for the personnel within contracting organisations charged to have undergone any recognised test of competency to do so.”

- Weeks before the beginning of the 2018 autumn term, the ceiling of soon-to-be opened North-West Community Campus school in Dumfries caved in due to a leak caused by a badly fitted sprinkler. The school was built with a private finance initiative (PFI) costing £28 million.

Under the PFI system, in operation until 2018, private contractors built public buildings and maintain sites in exchange for mortgage-style payments, usually over 25 years paid for by public funds. The 17 Edinburgh schools cost £130 million to build but will eventually cost taxpayers £531 million. The scheme was initially introduced under the Conservatives in 1992 and then vastly expanded by the 1997 Blair Labour government.

A recent survey of 1,500 British state school leaders commissioned by the National Association of Head Teachers found that 83 percent of schools lack funds to repair dilapidated school buildings. The survey confirm those of a

Department of Education 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.

Despite the collapse of the school ceiling in a Victorian-era building, resulting in hospitalisations, Rosemead Preparatory School remained open. The school commented, “Parents and families can be reassured that the school day is continuing as usual today for the rest of the school.”

This decision was taken under condition in which there is a hysterical campaign by the ruling party, backed by Labour and the trade unions, that schools must remain open at all costs during the pandemic.

The government and Labour claim that schools must remain open in the best interests of children, but what is driving this policy is the imperative of big business is that they be kept open in order to allow parents to go to work and prevent any curtailment of the accumulation of profit.

The run-down state of schools can only exacerbate the transmission of COVID-19 in schools—which will only be safe for face-to-face teaching when the virus is eliminated. Children are crammed into overcrowded classrooms, in run-down school buildings which in some cases are structurally unsound. They are catching and spreading COVID, and in thousands of cases developing Long COVID with unknown long term health consequences. There have been 112 child COVID fatalities to date, and more will succumb to this dreadful disease.

**Join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, attend our meetings and receive our regular newsletter.**



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**