

UK schools face devastating funding crisis

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Schools in the UK are facing an unprecedented funding crisis, threatening staff redundancies, larger class sizes, restrictions to the curriculum and the elimination of support services.

This is even before the Conservative government spells out in detail its budget on November 17, said to include £40 billion worth of cuts across all government departments.

A recent snapshot survey by the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) of 11,000 heads and school leaders in England revealed half are considering teacher redundancies or cutting school hours to balance the school budget. Nine out of 10 schools expect to run out of money even before the next tranche of cuts arrive. Some 66 percent anticipate losing teaching assistants.

Many respondents declared they would have to reduce learning support for individual pupils, including counselling for mental health problems, as well as axing school trips.

A survey of 670 out of 1,500 schools by the NAHT Cymru returned similar responses, with 60 percent saying they would have to reduce the number of teachers or staff hours. They are also considering cuts to building maintenance and school equipment and using school reserves to balance the books.

Powys council in Wales sent a briefing to schools with cost saving suggestions such as wearing coats to save on energy bills or teaching remotely one day a week.

In Yorkshire, more than half the schools are in deficit according to NAHT data. Headteacher at Molescroft Primary School, Beverley, told the BBC, “I can’t cure that amount of deficit without cutting staff.”

Chief executive of the Education Alliance group of seven schools Jonny Uttley said, “I’d love to be able to provide far more free school meals, far more breakfast clubs and after-school clubs but the money isn’t there to do that and we are having to make some really tough decisions.”

He explained there was a 20 percent uptake in pupils attending breakfast clubs. UK child poverty rose to 4.3

million this year, forecast to reach 33 percent by 2026-27. Families increasingly choose between heating and eating, with many parents skipping meals to feed their children. School breakfast clubs are a lifeline.

The Rev Steve Chalke, whose Oasis foundation runs 52 academies in England, told the *Guardian*, “At this burn rate, in under three years we will be bankrupt. No one is in a position to keep going for very long eating their reserves.”

Electricity and gas expenditure for his chain of schools soared from £26,000 a year to £89,000, despite the six-month energy price cap introduced by the government. “Any government that neglects the welfare and education of its children had better be saving up for its future mental health and benefits bills...”

Garry Ratcliffe, CEO of the Galaxy Trust schools, reported spending more on mental health support for children. The schools support families with advice on how to claim benefits or challenge rent rises, as well as providing food parcels.

The biggest expenditure for schools is wages. Schools are expected to self-finance a massively below inflation 5 percent teachers’ pay deal and cope with rising costs across the board.

In a comment shared thousands of times, the head of a London school tweeted November 5, “Been Head of a school of 1000 children for 3 years. The entire time has been spent cutting costs. Gone from 8 Senior Leaders down to 1. Cut several teaching staff. Total cuts of £1 million. It is still not enough and deficit budget beckons...”

If heads are contemplating laying off teaching staff, pastoral care in schools will be wiped out. Staff employed in these essential roles will be the first to go.

Pastoral care has been embedded in inner city schools with an impoverished intake for over two decades. The number of children entitled to free school meals was the initial criteria for extra funding, but it developed in all schools depending on levels of social and emotional need.

From 2004, schools were given—under the Children

Act—joint responsibility with social services for child protection. Safeguarding measures were put in place to ensure levels of safety both in and out of school for more at risk pupils and the whole school.

There was a recognition that paraprofessionals were required to assist schools to tackle pressing social needs particularly for more vulnerable children and families. Some schools employ social workers, learning mentors, and school family liaison officers. Feeding and clothing are key issues, as well as help to access benefits and resources needed to learn.

Depending on the ethos of the school, pastoral care takes different forms. Schools may provide breakfast, lunchtime or after school clubs.

A spokesperson for the Department for Education dismissed head teachers' concerns with the perfunctory response, "We understand that schools are facing cost pressures which is why we are providing them with £53.8 billion [secondary schools] this year in core funding, including a cash increase of £4 billion for this financial year."

The extra £4 billion this year goes nowhere near what is needed to offset the consequences of soaring inflation. On Thursday, even the lowest measure of inflation (CPI) hit a 41-year high—rising to 11.1 percent from 10.1 percent the previous month. RPI inflation shot up to 14.2 percent.

In early October, 12 organisations, led by the largest teaching unions, sent an open letter to the government warning that a "cut in funding will be catastrophic": These were the National Education Union (NEU); National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Association of Colleges; Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL); Community Union; GMB Union, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT); National Governance Association; Parentkind; Sixth Form Colleges Association; UNISON and Unite the Union.

On November 8, the Stop Schools Cuts website was relaunched in anticipation of the forthcoming budget. Stop School Cuts is run by the National Education Union, the largest education union in Europe, supported by the ASCL, National Association of Head Teachers and Parentkind.

The website reveals:

"Of 20,094 schools with comparable data 18,060 (90%) had lower per pupil funding in real terms in 2023-24 than in 2022-23, and 12,952 (68%) had lower per pupil funding in real terms than in 2015-16.

Real terms per pupil funding... will be cut on average

from £6,028 in 2022-23 to £5,881 in 2023-24... equivalent to a cut in school spending power of £1 bn or 2.4%.

Even before the upcoming cuts, real terms per-pupil funding remains lower than it was in 2015-16...

Schools that have been historically under-funded face the largest cuts in 2023-24."

Three demands are addressed in the open letter to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak; to reverse the cuts facing schools, fully fund the pay awards and restore real terms per-pupil funding to 2010 levels. All will fall on the deaf ears of a Department of Education that employs "school resource management advisers" to identify "savings" in schools.

Organisations which will not even fight for the health and safety of their members during an ongoing pandemic, or even for minimal mitigation measures, will not fight the cuts. The unions have overseen decades of cuts to education.

Alongside the Labour Party—which functioned in a de facto coalition with the Tories at the height of the pandemic—the education unions played a crucial role in the precipitous reopening of schools after lockdowns. As COVID was not suppressed this enabled the virus to mutate and run riot and claim further tens of thousands of victims, including educators and children.

Opposed to mobilising a joint offensive against funding cuts, attacks on teachers' pensions and pay, the unions dissipate their members' growing anger. The NEU is balloting 300,000 teachers and support staff members in England and Wales for strike action over pay. The ballot will not close for another two months on January 13. This delay is even though last month, in an indicative ballot by the NEU, 86 percent of teacher members already backed strikes for fully funded, above-inflation pay rise.

A successful struggle by educators can only be fought by wresting control from the union bureaucracy and building rank and file committees under the democratic control of workers themselves.

Read the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee statement: "No to another school year of mass infections, deaths, and education cuts".

Join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and sign up for our newsletter. The Committee's Twitter page can be found here.



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