

Many school buildings in England at risk of collapse

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Schools in England are in such perilous state of structural degradation after years of cutbacks and lack of maintenance that many could collapse, putting both pupils and staff in danger. The Conservative government has been forced to acknowledge this, but will not guarantee the necessary remedial work to make them safe.

For the past two months the Department for Education (DfE) has refused to make public its Building Conditions Survey Data. This report lists the schools in need of urgent repair. They fear an outcry from parents and school staff, which could further ignite the wave of strikes over the cost-of-living crisis exacerbated by the devastating consequences of the pandemic and Ukraine war.

A coalition of trade unions recently wrote an open letter to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan February 16 highlighting the “shocking” state of schools which could end up “costing lives”, asking the government what action it was taking to eradicate the risk of building collapse. They also raised the issue of asbestos in school buildings, a material associated with deadly cancers. Signatories included the National Education Union (NEU), NASUWT, Unison, Unite, GMB and Community.

The government’s response was to shrug off responsibility for ensuring the safety of children and staff, saying that if they are made aware of imminent risk of building collapse then “immediate action is taken to ensure safety and remediate the situation.”

The government is fully aware some schools are at risk of collapse. In its annual report released in December, the DfE wrote, “There is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools which are at or approaching the end of their designed life-expectancy and structural integrity is impaired. The risk

predominantly exists in those buildings built in the years 1945 to 1970 which used ‘system build’ light frame techniques.”

The “light frame techniques” refers to the use of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC), a cheaper alternative to concrete, which becomes life-expired after 30 years. Its use continued into the 1980’s, being thermally efficient, fire resistance and lightweight making for speedier construction.

According to the DfE, “The likelihood of the school buildings safety risk increased in October 2021 due to the increased numbers of serious structural issues identified. The impact and likelihood are unlikely to reduce in 2022, as there was no agreement to increase condition funding or the scale of the rebuilding programme at SR21 [spending review 2021].”

The report raised the risk of building collapse from “critical-likely” as of April 2021 to “critical-very likely” in March 2022, after “serious structural issues” were found in five schools in the year to October 2021.

The schools included St Anne’s in Liverpool, closed for a long-term rebuild, Fearnville Primary in Bradford, when a teacher was hospitalised after being hit by a falling ceiling tile, and Fortis Academy in Birmingham after a concrete ceiling panel hit a desk.

In January this year, a piece of cladding fell off the roof of a school in Sheffield injuring a parent. The parent, Carla, was waiting to pick up her two children outside Dore Primary School when a 12-15ft-long fascia board with 4in nails fell off the roof and hit her on the head. Carla suffered a black eye, underwent an MRI scan and had to take three weeks off work. She has since suffered from tinnitus and has trouble reading.

“It is horrifying that we’ve got to this point,” she told the *Guardian*. “Our children’s school buildings are

literally falling apart and it feels like it is only a matter of time before something even more serious happens.

“My injuries are bad enough but the fact that this could so easily have been a child doesn’t bear thinking about. I know the school is doing everything they can, but I also know that they don’t have the funds.”

This is only the latest in a series the past year involving school buildings with potentially fatal consequences.

- In December, the Angel Road Junior School site in Norfolk was forced to close permanently, such was the state of disrepair. The Evolution Academy Trust said it could “no longer guarantee the safety of pupils, staff and visitors.”

- In July, the ceiling of a classroom at the Winston Churchill School in Woking collapsed during school time. Luckily, there were no casualties.

- In June, firefighters were called to school in Brent when the top half of a tower collapsed onto the roof of the sports hall. Fortunately, no one was injured.

- In March, Burnside Academy in Sunderland was forced to close after “structural movement” was precipitated by routine maintenance work.

Several schools have suffered partial roof collapses directly attributable to the use of RAAC in building materials. The situation is complicated by the fact that there is no official record of the materials used to build schools.

The DfE’s permanent secretary Susan Acland Hood was recently questioned by parliament’s Public Accounts Committee concerning the safety of the school estate. She told MPs that “a big clump of school buildings in England are coming to the end of their design life, all at the same time.”

The government is carrying out structural surveys on all schools in England, over five years, but they are visual and very limited.

The amount of remedial work is not determined by need but what the government is prepared to spend. Schools need £11.4 billion immediately for repairs to make them safe, but the government is only offering £1.8 billion for this year out of £13 billion it earmarked for building improvements since 2015. The government has a target of upgrading and remediating merely 500 schools out of a total of 32,226, even though a third of schools were built between 1960-1980 when RAAC was used widely.

According to National Achievement Survey research by the House of Commons library, capital spending on school buildings fell from 2009/10 to 2021/2022 by 37 percent, or 50 percent in real terms. The school estate is being run down as part of austerity cuts to pay for the banking collapse in 2008/9, the pandemic bailout, and the defence budget increases to pay for the war in Ukraine—all at the expense of the health and safety of pupils and staff.

The education unions did nothing to secure the safety of their members or pupils in their charge during the pandemic. During the current pay strikes, they make no mention that their members work in buildings that could collapse on them but are busy negotiating below inflation pay deals.

The Labour Party whether led by Jeremy Corbyn or Sir Keir Starmer have marched in lockstep with the Tories in all the austerity cuts since 2010. Current party leader Starmer made clear that Labour in office would put the economy, i.e. profits, first. When Jeremy Corbyn was Labour leader (2015-2019), he co-wrote a letter along with his Chancellor John McDonnell instructing local Labour councils to impose Tory cuts.

All who wish to take up the struggle for a fully resourced education system which guarantees the health and safety of staff and children should contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. This requires a struggle for socialism. The Committee’s Twitter page is here.



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