

Report declares many school buildings in England structurally unsafe

Margot Miller
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A damning report released by the National Audit Office (NAO) reveals that 700,000 children attend schools in England which need major rebuilding or renovation.

Around 38 percent of schools are housed in buildings which have passed their projected design life. Some schools, built on the cheap over a 30-year period from the 1950s using Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC), could collapse at any time. Of these, nearly 600 are undergoing urgent structural investigation.

The Conservative government, opposition Labour Party and education unions have been aware for years of the imminent risk of injury or death to pupils and staff caused by dilapidated buildings. Partial roof collapses have already occurred, but remedial work proceeds at a snail's pace.

In its annual report last year, the Department for Education 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 closed for a long-term rebuild, including St Anne's in Liverpool; Fearnville Primary in Bradford, where 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, cladding fell off the roof of Dore Primary School in Sheffield injuring a parent. A 12-15-foot-long fascia board with 4-inch nails fell from the roof hitting the parent on the head. She suffered a black eye, underwent an MRI scan, and had to take three weeks off work.

On June 16, four schools in Kent closed after the Institute of Structural Engineers warned about concrete used in each school's roof. Also in June, Mistley Norman Church of England and Hockley primary schools in Essex and two schools run by the Bishop Bewick Catholic education trust in the north-east, closed after RAAC was found in their ceilings.

The first major crisis occurred as far back as 2018 when the roof of Singlewell Primary school in Gravesend partially collapsed—luckily at the weekend with no casualties. Most concerning, the roof only showed signs of stress 24 hours before the incident. The Standing Committee on Structural Safety responded to this potential tragedy with a safety alert on the “failure of RAAC planks,” recommending that those installed before 1980 should be replaced.

RAAC was used widely in the construction of school roofs, walls and floors as a cheaper alternative to concrete. Professor Chris Goodier, an expert in construction engineering materials, has described RAAC as “an aerated lightweight cementitious material with no coarse aggregate; the material properties and structural behaviour therefore differs significantly from ‘traditional’ reinforced concrete.” It is filled with air pockets, degrades in wet conditions, and lacks the strength and durability of ordinary concrete.

In 1982, production of RAAC in the UK ended amid safety concerns, and the BRE research group subsequently declared it life-expiring after 30 years. The material was used in hospitals and many public buildings in the UK, and is still used in China, central Asia, India and the Middle East.

Goodier, who leads a major research project on RAAC, funded by the NHS, explained it can be “an appropriate construction material if properly designed, manufactured, installed and maintained. Our research has shown however, that this is often not the case for RAAC panels built in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.” The DfE has no records showing which schools were constructed using RAAC.

NAO's report, *The Condition of School Buildings*, published June 23, found the “DfE has been considering reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC)—a lightweight form of concrete that is susceptible to failure as a potential issue since late 2018 following a

school safety incident.”

But the DfE has sought to pass the buck onto schools—“the relevant local authority, academy trust or voluntary-aided body.” It issued “warning notes, expanded its data collection programme, and issued a guide for identifying RAAC.” In March 2022, the DfE sent a questionnaire to schools “asking whether their buildings contained RAAC”. Only the most superficial inspections have been conducted to locate RAAC, “The work mainly consists of visual inspections rather than structural inspections. The latter provide more assurance about the condition of a building, but are more expensive, take longer to carry out, and can be disruptive.”

Five years since the initial safety incident, remedial work is still mainly at the assessment stage, the report reveals. The “DfE currently lacks comprehensive information on the extent and severity of potential safety issues across the school estate, although it has made progress in the last year.”

Of the 14,900 schools with buildings constructed between 1930 and 1990, only 42 percent had carried out work to identify the presence of RAAC by May 2023. The DfE has identified 572 schools that may contain RAAC and 24 requiring immediate action. In May, the DfE pledged to provide funding for remedial work in schools where RAAC poses an immediate risk.

The report notes, “Since summer 2021, DfE has assessed the threat to safety in school buildings as a critical risk”. However, NAO’s report found there was “insufficient capital funding to address structural issues [which contributes] to the severity of the risk.” Just £2.3 billion a year was spent on school estates between 2016-17 and 2022-23, around half the £5.3 billion a year in capital funding which the DfE said was required to “maintain schools and mitigate the most serious risks of building failure.”

Capital spending on school buildings declined by 50 percent in real terms since 2010 under the whiplash of austerity by successive governments. Since then, public debt has piled higher still to finance corporate bailouts during the pandemic and to fund the astronomical costs of NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine.

The report into school buildings also identified long-known dangers associated with asbestos used in around 13,800 “system-built” school blocks, of which over a quarter may have deteriorated. The DfE has approved plans to assess just 200 and has yet to even employ specialists for the job. According to the National Education Union (NEU), 300 school staff have died from

mesothelioma since 2001, a deadly cancer associated with exposure to asbestos. It is estimated that classroom asbestos has killed 10,000 pupils and teachers in schools during the last four decades.

The Sunak government has launched an all-party inquiry into the use of RAAC in public buildings. It will prove as toothless as every other government inquiry. Each Whitehall department has been instructed to assign one civil servant to locate RAAC.

Joint general secretary of the NEU Kevin Courtney responded to the report saying, “If we are to prevent something catastrophic happening, such as building collapse, and to finally get to grips with the hidden killer asbestos in our schools, action must be taken—and significant funding put in place.”

Something catastrophic has already happened, namely when the NEU and other education unions worked with the Johnson government to herd staff and students back into unsafe schools at the height of the COVID pandemic. Aside from the untold deaths which resulted from this criminal policy, its long-term consequences are evident in Long COVID. Children who caught Covid are exhibiting a range of health problems including poor concentration and a sudden spike in the incidence of type 1 diabetes. This form of diabetes is linked to immune response, which COVID-19 can disrupt.

In February, the NEU, NASUWT, Unison, Unite, GMB and Community wrote an open letter to Education Secretary Gillian Keegan 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.

Apart from futile appeals to the government, the unions will do nothing to ensure the safety of schools. They are currently trying to wind up the teachers’ dispute over pay, workload and funding, making clear they will accept a below inflation pay offer if only the government will meet them and accept their services.

Without the intervention of the working class organized in its own independent rank and file committees to secure the resources necessary, schools will remain potential deathtraps. For further information, contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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