

Education funding crisis devastating UK teaching profession

Tom Pearce, Margot Miller
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Amid an ongoing crisis of teacher recruitment and retention bound up with decades of underfunding, Chancellor Jeremy Hunt's Autumn Statement does nothing to address the challenges facing schools.

Not one penny extra will be given to education, despite staff shortages, large class sizes, overwork, dwindling SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) support, and schools in danger of structural collapse. Under these impossible conditions, educators are expected to teach pupils from increasingly impoverished families while policed by the government's school inspectorate Ofsted—a system which drove head teacher Ruth Perry to suicide.

According to the Education Support charity's 2023 index, educator wellbeing has reached its lowest level in five years, with stress, insomnia and burnout all continuing to rise and working in schools described as “unsustainably demanding”. More than a third (36 percent) of the profession experience burnout, up 9 percent on last year, and half experienced insomnia or difficulty sleeping.

Teachers' overall wellbeing score was 43.44, well below the national average of all occupations of 51.40. The charity states that workers with scores between 41 and 45 should be considered “at high risk of psychological distress and increased risk of depression”.

Teacher vacancies in England and Wales are now at a record high, increasing from 1,600 in November 2021 to 2,300 in November 2022. According to the National Foundation for Educational Research, this is 93 percent higher than in the year before the pandemic. Schools paper over the cracks with costly supply cover or, struggling to balance the books, by dividing classes between colleagues, exacerbating workload.

Huge numbers are leaving the profession, roughly

44,000 teachers in England in 2022—about 7,800 more than in the previous year. Nearly a third of early-career teachers who qualified in the last decade in England have since left the profession, more than 81,000.

A total of 5,610 teachers in England and Wales opted to take early retirement in the year to September 2023, compared with 3,932 in the previous 12 months—a 42 percent rise—according to data disclosed by the Department for Education (DfE) in response to a Freedom of Information request.

Financial advisers Quilter, who submitted the request, said the Teachers' Pension Scheme shift from a final salary to a less generous career-average plan, raised contribution rates and increases in the scheme's pension age “may all be contributing to the significant rise in teacher retirements”.

In 2012/2013, the public sector unions including the education unions sold out a protracted struggle to defend pensions.

The same issues surround recruitment into teacher training. Figures released by the DfE last December revealed that just 59 percent of its target for secondary subject trainees was fulfilled in 2022-23, down from 79 percent in 2021-22.

Philip Nye, a data scientist at the Institute for Government, told Parliament's Education Select Committee: “It's fair to say I think recruitment to ITT [initial teacher training] is at crisis levels.”

Key findings of research submitted to the committee in a report published June 20, “Teacher recruitment, training and retention”, include the following:

- A decline in teachers' salaries since 2010 to 2023 on average by 13 percent. The government's commitment to raise starting salaries to £30,000 in 2024, will still leave pay 2 percent lower than in 2010.
- The pay gap between school teachers and Further

Education (post-16) college teachers has widened from 14 percent in 2010 to 21 percent today. Teacher retention in further education is thus even worse, with around 25 percent of college teachers leaving after one year, the comparative figure for schools being 15 percent. After three years, almost half of college teachers have quit, compared to a quarter of school teachers.

- Education funding has been slashed overall—school spending per pupil in England fell 9 percent from 2009/10 to 2019/20, while spending for 16–18-year-olds fell by 12 percent.

On its school cuts campaign website, the NEU states: “The new projections for school funding show that, assuming staff were to receive pay awards next year simply in line with 2023/24, then: 92% of mainstream schools face real-terms cuts from April.”

For all their criticisms, however, the education unions have not lifted a finger to combat either these funding cuts or stagnating pay and worsening working conditions, despite the determination of their members to fight.

Earlier this year, the NEU, the largest teachers’ union, sold out the teachers’ months-long pay dispute with a rotten 6.5 percent, below-inflation deal it recommended its members accept while sitting on a 95 percent ballot mandate for industrial action, and just as the NASUWT membership voted to join the action for the first time. NASUWT’s leadership recommended acceptance on the same day. This sabotaged what could have been a joint industrial offensive by a combined membership of 750,000.

The NEU was rewarded by the government with an invitation to join the “workload taskforce”.

That the deal was accepted by members was more a vote of no confidence in the union bureaucracy rather than an agreement with a deal which was not even fully funded—thus exacerbating the funding crisis schools face.

The NEU’s response to Hunt’s Autumn Statement was limited to more futile appeals to the government to invest in education. These pleas are utterly worthless, made to a government dragging its feet even over remedial action at the many schools on the point of structural collapse due to the presence of RAAC concrete.

Schools Week revealed this month that three schools

in Stockport, after initial inspections deemed them safe, had to close after further investigations into RAAC.

Whatever their token complaints, the education unions are allowing their members to teach in unsafe buildings which are potentially a danger to life, reprising their role throughout the pandemic. It was the teaching unions that enabled the government—led by Boris “let the bodies pile high” Johnson with his then chancellor “Dr Death” Sunak—to reopen schools before the COVID virus was suppressed and without a mass vaccination programme in place—subordinating health to the campaign to “open the economy”.

Virtually every pupil has been infected by now, many of them multiple times. Educators, like health workers, figure disproportionately among the almost 2 million in the UK suffering Long COVID, doubtless having its own impact on teacher recruitment and retention.

While there is no money made available for education or protecting life, billions are provided for corporate profiteering and military violence. Hunt’s statement handed over £11 billion a year in tax breaks to big business and confirmed the government’s commitment to 2 percent of GDP spending on the armed forces—over £45 billion a year.

Fighting for a radical redistribution of the wealth of the society to meet the needs of the education system in the twenty-first century means breaking the stranglehold of the corporatist trade unions. A lead is given by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee (UK), formed to fight the unions’ and the government’s reckless endangerment of educators in the early years of the pandemic. Contact the Committee today and subscribe to our newsletter.



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