

UK budget: a pittance for crumbling, asbestos riddled schools

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The UK Labour government's first budget since coming to office in July does nothing to reverse the cuts to education since 2010 or make schools safe.

The UK school estate is in a dangerous, dilapidated state, with ill maintained buildings, some literally crumbling and many thousands riddled with deadly asbestos.

Large class sizes of children from increasingly impoverished families, diminishing support for special needs, a proscriptive curriculum creating work overload for stressed-out teachers exacerbated by punitive government Ofsted inspections—all has led to a crisis in recruitment and retention of staff.

Two recent reports underline the crisis in UK schools. The National Audit Office (NAO) concludes by noting that the provision for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is “financially unsustainable”.

Another report exposes the enormous dangers facing staff and pupils due to the widespread use of asbestos in school buildings.

The *School Cuts* website, run by the education trade unions with the support of charity Parentkind and the National Governance Association, estimates a sum of £12.2 billion is needed to restore spending on education to just 2010 levels.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced an increase in funding for schools of just £2.3 billion next year. This is not a genuine increase. The amount includes £1 billion towards the high needs funding deficit local authorities accrued providing SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) education.

The “remaining increase to the schools budget”, according to the Education Hub on the government's website, is to pay for the 5.5 percent pay rise for teachers this year and to “help cover pay awards in 2025-26.”

The education unions pushed through the last substandard pay award--after ending industrial action--with claims that a Labour government would address the crisis in education after years of underfunding by the Tories. Reeves budget exposes these claims as false.

The budget offers nothing to address the dangerous state of the school estate. The Education Hub lists an extra £1.4 billion for the school rebuilding programme, to keep “on track to rebuild 518 schools” over 10 years. £2.1 billion is allocated to maintain existing schools, an increase of just £300 million. A further £300 million is earmarked to maintain colleges.

But everyone knows that many billions of pounds are needed, not only to build new schools but to make the existing estate safe for pupils and staff. The National Education Union's (NEU) Daniel Kebede noted there had been a “£40 billion cumulative cut to school capital funding [for school buildings] since 2010.”

A cheap form of concrete, RAAC, was used extensively in public buildings between 1950-1980. In contact with damp in an ill-maintained building, and life-expired after 30 years, walls and ceilings are liable to collapse, posing risk to life. Despite the problem being known about for years, action in schools was only taken last year when shortly before the start of the autumn term three school buildings experienced sudden roof collapses.

Even deadlier is the threat of asbestos in many public buildings, including schools. Inhaling tiny asbestos fibres causes lung diseases asbestosis or mesothelioma, a particularly aggressive cancer. A massive refurbishment of the entire school estate is long overdue.

Knowing the social and potential political impact of the scale of the crisis, the Conservative-supporting *Daily Mail* last month launched one of its “hot button” campaigns: “Asbestos: Britain's Hidden Killer.” Calling for the removal of asbestos in public buildings, it was launched following a “bombshell report” following an investigation by the Joint Union Asbestos Committee representing eight trade unions.

The committee found the prevalence of asbestos in hospitals and 21,500 schools built since the 1960s. Asbestos was used for insulation and as a fire retardant until banned in 1982. Hundreds of thousands of staff and pupils exposed to the invisible fibres face an untimely death, the authors predict. A period of up to 40 years may pass between

exposure and the onset of mesothelioma. Death follows diagnosis after about 18 months.

Since 1980, at least 1,400 educators and 12,600 former pupils succumbed to mesothelioma after inhaling asbestos in schools. Asbestos is the UK's biggest industrial killer, claiming 5,000 lives each year. According to the committee, "Their deaths would be the consequence of ineffective asbestos regulations and a cost-cutting culture that wrongly implies 'asbestos is safe as long as it is not disturbed'."

This horrific number of preventable deaths is set to grow as schools are allowed to fall into disrepair exposing more children and staff to danger. The report says that most of the UK's 32,000 schools, except those built after 1999 when asbestos was finally banned, probably contain asbestos.

The education capital spending announced in the budget won't even touch the sides.

"Clearing the Air," a report published last year by Mesothelioma UK, made clear, "Based on the current speed of school and hospital rebuilding programmes in England it will take over 400 years to remove all the asbestos from schools and hospitals."

It notes, "Previous research has found that asbestos is present in 80% of schools and 94% of hospital trusts in England. In particular, there are a large number of school and hospital buildings constructed between 1945 and 1980 using system build techniques, for example CLASP schools, where asbestos was used as an integral part of the building and cannot usually be removed without demolishing the building."

Mesothelioma UK "estimates a total cost of removing asbestos of around £3.2 billion for removal from schools and £1.3 billion for removal from hospitals, making a total removal cost of just under £4.5 billion.... It notes, that the "Demolition of system-build schools and hospitals is estimated to cost an additional £11.2 billion on top of this."

The record of successive governments shows they could not care less about safety in schools. Staff and pupils were among the first rushed back into schools at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to ensure their parents got back to work in offices and factories. Then opposition Labour leader and now Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer led the charge insisting that schools stay open in a pandemic, "No ifs, no buts."

Despite the continued horrific consequences of the pandemic, schools are denied the technology to keep the air clean and disinfected—meaning the spread of the mutating COVID virus and other respiratory illnesses.

In the budget Reeves offered peanuts in comparison to overall public spending, for rolling out of free breakfast clubs for primary school children (4-11 years) in disadvantaged areas. While this would triple investment for

breakfast clubs, its cost is just over £30 million. Schools will still have to pay 25 percent of the cost of running them.

Reeves also announced "£15 million to begin delivery of 3,000 school-based nurseries." The government describes the programme as "quality, affordable childcare." The nurseries the government has in mind are not quality early years education for 3–4-year-olds—which requires substantial investment in appropriate settings led by trained nursery teachers and staffs—but holding pens, while parents/the "workless" are driven into cheap labour jobs.

The National Education Union has instructed Leigh Day solicitors to challenge the longstanding government position that asbestos is safe *in situ* unless damaged, but their record shows that whatever rhetoric they come up with, they and the other education unions will not mobilize their members to fight back.

The education unions welcomed Labour's budget. This despite education and infrastructure spending announced being vastly below what is required and Reeves putting through ongoing spending cuts. Moreover, the accompanying Red Book to the budget states that the government "will need to carefully consider the trade-offs required to afford pay awards. Over the medium term, above-inflation pay awards are only affordable if they can be funded from improved productivity."

If necessary, it states that the recommendations of public sector pay review bodies (PRBs) could be ignored. The document warns: "If the PRBs recommend pay awards above the level departments have budgeted for, the government will have to consider the justifications—for example where there are especially acute recruitment and retention demands, or where productivity improvements can unlock further funding."

The *Times* on Monday reported a Treasury source who doubled down, saying, "The government is clear that any future above-inflation pay rises must come alongside productivity reforms... That is the right position for both public sector workers and the taxpayer."



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