

UK budget steps up attacks on education

By Tom Pearce
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New research by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) think tank finds that every school in England faces budget cuts by 2020. The EPI estimates that every primary school faces an average real terms loss of £74,000, with secondary schools facing a deficit of £291,000 in the next three years.

This is the reality of the Conservative government's £3 billion a year real terms cut in funding for school age education, to be imposed by 2020.

These statistics come as no surprise to head teachers who are dealing with the impact of relentless cuts. A primary school in Cambridgeshire wrote to parents last week explaining the impact of funding changes and the "apprenticeship levy" of 1 percent on school budgets.

From May, all employers with wage bills over £3 million a year must pay 0.5 percent of that towards apprenticeship funding. This will hit council schools as they come under the overall local authority wage bill—with small academy schools exempt as they are not under direct authority control.

The primary school letter explained that funding cuts are having a "negative impact of £70,000 on the school budget for 2016/2017." The head teacher said, "This just doesn't just affect us" and indicated how "serious the funding crisis has become."

In the government's March 8 budget, the worst fears of head teachers were realised as Chancellor Phillip Hammond announced continued austerity, ignoring the concerns of the teaching profession.

For education, the budget found £320 million for the creation of more state funded "free schools." Free schools, set up by parents, charities and other groups, are state-funded, but privately run and have been criticized for creating a two-tier education system, weakening current schools.

The government's aim is to create grammar schools—based on selective education—out of these new essentially private schools, overturning a 1998 ban on

new grammars. In addition, just £216 million will be added to funding to refurbish existing schools. The budget fell massively short of what schools require just to get by and is an insult in response to calls of school leaders to save jobs, courses and reduce class sizes.

On budget day, Education Secretary Justine Greening was heckled by head teachers as she spoke at the Association of School and College Leaders meeting about the new plans. In response to the policy of creating new grammar schools, under conditions whereby existing schools are struggling to survive, she received cries of "rubbish" from attending members.

The GMB union has many school support staff among its members. Analysing official figures, it found that a total of nearly £1 billion is to be spent on new free schools. In the first full year of the next Parliament, £655 million of capital funding is set aside for free schools, with the just announced £320 million in addition to this. The aim is the continued privatisation of education by moving schools from local authority control to the private sector, with new schools being controlled from the beginning by trusts and companies.

As budgets are slashed, the crisis schools face exacerbates, with head teachers warning that schools are being forced to axe courses, increase class sizes and cut back on trips and after-school clubs.

Not a week passes without a story about schools struggling to cope with budget restraints. With schools forced to make decisions about cutting funding to key resources and school trips, the educational and cultural opportunities being offered to schoolchildren are dwindling every week. The latest round of articles reported that a three- to four-day week is being considered by schools in a number of regions. A shortened school day is being looked at to cut costs. In addition, class sizes are soaring, with 35 pupils in a class becoming the norm and rising in some schools.

Another result of the budget squeeze is the narrowing of subjects that are being offered, with some schools not employing teachers and cutting the choices for students at GCSE and A Level.

The situation is getting so desperate that two schools have already written to parents to set up direct debits to pay for basic resources. The schools in Wokingham, Berkshire, which historically is one of the most poorly funded local authorities (LA) in the country, have been forced to take donations from parents just to offer pupils a basic education.

St. Crispin's, a state secondary, has asked parents to set up a monthly direct debit to help it cover its everyday costs. On its web site, it states: "During recent years, schools have faced an increasing challenge with regards to reducing budgets.

"We would like to request that parents and carers consider offering a voluntary financial contribution to the school. This might be in the form of a one-off contribution or more helpfully a monthly direct debit of between £1-£5 (or more!). Just £1 a month from every family could make an immediate and actual difference of an additional income in excess of £10K per annum."

Another school, The Hawthorns School, a primary in Wokingham, asked parents to set up monthly contributions.

This signals the demise of free education for children, when even the state sector are forced to charge for basic educational rights.

In the face of these attacks, what is the response of the main teaching unions? National Union of Teachers (NUT) General Secretary Kevin Courtney described the budget as "a complete dereliction of duty to our children and young people." He added, "The chancellor knows full well that schools and sixth-form colleges up and down the country are on their knees struggling to make ends meet."

Courtney, was part of the Socialist Teachers Alliance (STA), and is backed by pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He is also a founding member of the People's Assembly—a Trades Union Congress backed coalition which includes various other union bureaucrats, a few Labour Party "lefts," the Green Party and pseudo-left groups, including the SWP.

Courtney has established a school funding campaign, in alliance with the Association of Teachers and

Lecturers (ATL), several of the largest trade unions and the People's Assembly. Their "schoolcuts" web site found that 98 percent of schools would see cuts under the new "fair funding" formula between now and 2020.

However, the sum of their action is for those concerned to contact their local Member of Parliament. The same Tory government that is hell bent on destroying the social right to education and privatizing is called on by the NUT and ATL to "take immediate action to inject much needed money into an already beleaguered system and protect our children's education."

ATL leader Mary Bousted said in response to the budget only that, "Parents and children will be deeply disappointed that the chancellor has not taken this opportunity to put more money into the national funding formula, which would be the best way to improve social mobility and ensure all children get a good education."

No protests, let alone strikes, in response to this unprecedented crisis are planned by any teaching unions. Instead, it has been left to some school governors, who are volunteers, to threaten industrial action over funding cuts.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>