

British government's educational "reforms" exacerbate inequality, reduce school funding

By Alice Summers
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Educational inequality is rising across the UK, according to research published by the Institute of Education (IOE) at University College London.

The four-year study, in collaboration with the Nuffield Foundation, showed that central government educational changes have massively exacerbated inequality among school pupils, with children from low-income families being excluded from the best-performing schools.

The Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) data examined in the report demonstrates a correlation between maintenance or improvement of a school's classification to "outstanding" in the 2010-2015 period, and a reduction in the number of students eligible for free school meals (FSM)—a marker of low-income.

Conversely, those schools ranked as "requires improvement" or "inadequate" by Ofsted typically saw an increase in the percentage of students eligible for FSM over the same period.

Similarly, the IOE reported that free schools, privately run academies with state funding, had on average a lower proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM than the neighbourhoods that they serve.

The study indicates that many of the country's best state schools effectively shun working-class children from low-income families—with these pupils often relegated to under-performing institutions—as a means to maintain their high status.

With schools and teachers facing increasing pressure to get good exam results and achieve high Ofsted rankings, or risk being taken over by a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), many schools have been obliged to narrow their curriculums and focus relentlessly on assessments.

MATs—amalgamations of several collaborating academy schools—are publicly owned but privately run, and, along with the rollback of Local Authorities (LAs) from school oversight and the increase in the number of

academy schools, they have been key components of successive Labour and Conservative governments' reactionary educational "reforms."

Academies were first set up under the 1997 Blair Labour government as a halfway house to privatised education and have since been massively expanded under the Conservatives. They now make up 60 percent of secondary schools and 20 percent of primaries in England.

According to the IOE research, the competitive pressures of the Ofsted and academisation system effectively incentivise schools to prioritise their own interests in order to attract funding and pupils, rather than prioritising the needs of their students. Unsurprisingly, those who suffer most from this inter-institutional competition are struggling students from the poorest backgrounds.

Josh Hillman, director of education at the Nuffield Foundation, stated: "The fact that higher performing schools are accepting fewer disadvantaged pupils suggests increased school autonomy is perpetuating inequality, and that is a major cause for concern. This research reveals the contradictions inherent in an approach that simultaneously encourages self-improvement and collaboration, and yet offers a very narrow definition of success in terms of exam results and Ofsted grades. In practice, schools are incentivised to compete, and that is not always in the best interests of pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds."

Indeed, rather than improving standards across educational institutions, a study from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that there is little difference in the performance of schools run by academy chains and those run by councils.

The EPI recommended that councils should retake control of privately run academies that may be struggling

in order to improve educational standards.

In addition to the academisation of many schools across the country, the educational policy reforms of Labour and Conservative governments have in practice meant massive spending cuts, leading to teacher shortages, threats to teacher pay, overcrowded classrooms and dilapidated school buildings.

In the eight years between the 2009-2010 school year and 2017-2018, average spending per school pupil in England has fallen by 8 percent in real terms, according to data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). Although total spending in this period rose slightly by 1 percent, when the 10 percent increase in pupil numbers is taken into account, this translates into a significant drop.

The rate of spending cuts per pupil in Wales was slightly lower—approximately a 5 percent reduction per pupil.

Sixth-form colleges for youth aged 16 to 18 were hit hardest by government spending reductions, seeing a 25 percent drop per pupil in England. Local authority spending also fell by a staggering 55 percent.

Funding shortages have become so severe across UK schools that many institutions have had to rely on donations from parents or on teaching staff spending their own income to afford basic educational supplies.

A survey in May of 238 school leaders, conducted by the Association of School and College Leaders education union, revealed that 20 percent had been forced to ask parents for voluntary contributions over the last 12 months, while a quarter (24 percent) expected to have to do so in the coming year.

Another study by educational magazine *Schools Week* found that thousands of schools have created Amazon wish lists online in order to request that parents or other donors purchase essential school supplies, such as library books and pens, on their behalf.

According to research by the GMB union, more than half of support staff at schools are having to fork out their own money on essentials for school pupils, including food for hungry children, tampons, pens, pencils and books. A staggering 78 percent of the support staff surveyed said that their school has been forced to make “significant financial cutbacks” as a result of central government education underfunding.

In opposition to these attacks on educational provision across the country, many teachers or support staff have balloted to take strike action.

At the end of March, teachers voted overwhelmingly for strike action over pay and pensions at conferences of the

National Education Union (NEU) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT).

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland’s largest teaching union, will also ballot its members on strike action in late September. Scottish teachers are currently in discussions with employers for a 10 percent wage increase, and will be balloted over whether to take industrial action if their pay demands are not met.

The intolerable situation facing teachers is largely the responsibility of the teaching unions, which have refused to fight the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

With 400,000 members in the NEU, 280,000 in the NASUWT and 54,000 in the EIS, these unions represent the majority of UK teachers. A joint offensive by teachers from all three unions would represent a powerful challenge to the government’s austerity and privatisation agenda.

All experience shows that the teaching unions are opposed to any such struggle. Teachers have repeatedly shown their willingness to fight the attacks by government and management, only to see any struggles isolated along local and regional lines and led into a dead end by their unions. What few strikes have been organised have been of a token character and designed only to placate growing anger.

Teachers and students across the education sector must organise themselves into rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. Such a struggle must be waged as part of a socialist programme calling for fully funded highly quality and well-resourced public education as a social right.

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