

UK school funding crisis threatens children's basic education

By Tom Pearce
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The funding crisis wracking UK schools is wreaking havoc across the country. Schools are being forced to manage their budgets in ways that did not seem imaginable a decade ago and taking desperate measures to balance their budgets.

At the annual conference of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), heads warned that there is a “£5.7 billion funding shortfall” that could leave many schools bankrupt.

Many schools have already cut administration staff and reduced extra-curricular activities on offer. There have been staff redundancies and pay cuts for many.

Exacerbating the problem of funding, the government put in place statutory pay rises at the start of the 2018-2019 academic year without providing additional cash to cover the cost of the paltry pay rise. Instead, schools have had to make choices about the standard of children's schooling, inevitably leading to a detrimental effect on pupils and staff.

The education-funding crisis is moving into a new stage, where initial cuts to schools are now moving towards the destruction of basic educational provision.

A school in Stockport, in northern England, Vale View Primary, has taken the measure of closing early on Fridays due to a desperate situation created by the lack of funding. Even more shocking is the fact that parents who cannot pick up their children at lunchtime early are going to be charged.

The school is one of 25 that have taken the drastic measure of shortening the school week due to funding constraints.

When announcing the changes to *School Week*, Vale View Primary's chair of governors attempted to mask the situation in a letter to parents by selling shutting early as a way of allowing them to “spend more time with your children.” The head teacher, Helen Hannah, cited the statutory pay rises as a reason that she was making the changes due to a £100,000 deficit in her school. The head has also made double figure redundancies and justified the changes to ensure that class sizes would not rise to 40 pupils per class. Such are the choices that head teachers have being forced to make across the country.

A huge £400,000 worth of cuts have already been made to the Vale View Primary's budget. The school is due to cut nearly £10,000 in art therapy and has reduced the amount of money spent on speech and language therapy by £16,000.

School trip subsidies have been cut by £50,000 and resources have been cut by £100,000. Additionally, £136,000 has been saved from not replacing teaching assistants.

An indication of the indifference of the government to the crisis was the reported refusal, three times since last September, of Education Secretary Damian Hinds to meet head teachers to discuss the damage caused by cuts with those on the front line.

Vale View Primary's fate is one now common in English schools. The scale of the impact of the cuts to education is mirrored across the country.

In the north of England, some schools are holding extra non-uniform days in order to raise cash from the donations that come from not wearing the usual school uniform. In Essex and inner London, lunchtime supervisors have been cut and replaced with the class teachers, who must give up their lunchtime to look after children. Teachers are also cleaning their own classrooms and areas after cleaning staff have been cut.

How are teachers able to plan and provide a decent education under these conditions? Teachers are already under extreme pressure to deliver high quality lessons and in some cases to mark to ridiculous standards. They are burning out and the funding crisis is exacerbating the situation.

In other schools, wish lists and crowd funding have been established for parents and carers to buy “luxury items” such as pencils, glue sticks and rulers. Some schools already have cut hours to save money, with many pupils in Birmingham's primary schools being sent home at lunchtime on Fridays.

This month, the *Guardian* reported on the comments of teachers it surveyed about the crisis. It noted, “A chemistry teacher from Cheshire described four years of redundancies, school buildings no longer fit for purpose and diminishing resources: ‘No current GCSE textbooks, limited photocopying, sharing exercise books between classes, broken equipment not replaced.’”

A Gloucestershire science teacher said his annual budget had been cut by 45 percent since 2010. “We are actually unable to provide students with the GCSE ‘required practicals’ as the chemicals and enzymes are too expensive. Our buildings are cold. No heating until November is the rule even though

teachers and students are wearing their coats indoors.”

The WSWS spoke to a teacher from a Cambridgeshire school, who said, “Sixth form hours have been cut from timetables in order to make the post-16 area financially viable. Teachers are worried that they will not be able to teach the course and students are worried that they will lose teachers input into their A Levels.”

In the face of unprecedented funding cuts, the education unions have done nothing to oppose the government.

Paul Whiteman, the National Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), in a *TES* article earlier this month, presented the problem as one in which “cross-party” MPs had not been aware of the devastation caused by funding cuts. However, “MPs are waking up, fortunately. According to our research, more than half are now prepared to say that the school funding crisis is real.” All that was required was a little more “honesty” from the same Tory ministers who have slashed billions from education over the last decade. “The Department for Education has listened somewhat to us and other unions and has found a little extra money, but now we need real movement from the Treasury. The trouble is, the chancellor doesn’t appear to be listening,” said Whiteman.

Kevin Courtney of the National Education Union (NEU), who is hailed by Britain’s pseudo-left groups as a militant fighter, has done nothing more than set up a website documenting funding cuts to school.

As with the NAHT, the NEU proposes nothing beyond an appeal for teachers to write to their Members of Parliament. This tactic so far has only enabled the situation to be debated in parliament for three hours.

The only other action undertaken by the main teachers’ unions was an ineffective march in London last year and a protest rally called on a week-day evening. A protest by NAHT members in London, culminating in a parliamentary lobby, took place at the end of February. On March 4, there was a three-hour debate on school funding in Parliament, with the Conservatives promising only to stick to their policies.

Internationally, education workers are taking action into their own hands. In every country, there is mass support among broad sections of workers for a fight to defend public education. This is shown in the international wave of strikes and protests against education cuts in the US, Colombia, Algeria, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Portugal, France, Netherlands, Morocco, Zimbabwe and Tamil Nadu, in southern India.

In all of these struggles workers are coming into conflict with the union bureaucracies who, when they cannot prevent strikes from breaking out, seek to do everything to isolate and sabotage them.

In the UK, Courtney et al are calling on teachers to wait for a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn and are sitting on demands by workers for action to be taken now.

At the end of last year, the NEU sent out an “indicative” survey to 257,849 members, to which 82,487 teachers responded. The survey found that 100 percent supported a campaign to expose funding cuts, with 99 percent of responses saying that funding cuts had had a severe impact on their schools.

However, the most significant statistic was the appetite for a fight against the cuts, with four-fifths of members prepared to strike. 82 percent of teachers at state schools and 84 percent at colleges were prepared to take strike action to “secure better funding for schools and the full implementation of the teachers’ pay award.” Only 31 percent of teachers participated in the vote, significantly lower than the required 50 percent level required to strike under anti-strike laws, expressing teacher’s lack of confidence in the NEU.

Despite the demand for a fight, Courtney made another bland statement committing the union to nothing: “The NEU Executive will be meeting to discuss these findings and will be considering the next steps in the campaign.”

UK teachers should look to the struggle of teachers internationally and draw the necessary lessons in order to fight against the destruction of free, public education. Only a complete break with the trade union bureaucracy will enable them to fight the education cuts. Teachers must form rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves and independent of the unions. These must turn to education workers internationally and base themselves on what teachers and students need, not what the ruling elite say is affordable.

The author recommends:

The global struggle of teachers
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