

‘Funding crisis’—a detailed look at the funding shortage in UK schools

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Local Government analysis. According to campaigners, more than 200 schools in England are cutting their school weeks short due to funding shortages. This raises questions over legal ramifications and the responsibility of the government. Jean Tsang, associate in the charities and education team at Bates Wells and governor of a maintained primary school in central London, addresses these questions and looks at the worrying effects of this ‘funding crisis’ on the ‘most vulnerable children’ in the educational system.

Why is there a lack of funding for England's schools at the moment? What role has and will Brexit play in this? What issues could this create further down the line for current students and local authorities?

Years of austerity, growing numbers of pupils, the cumulative effect of education reforms and short-term policy initiatives, increasingly complex special needs requirements and additional costs burdens have pushed schools into a funding crisis. Swingeing cuts to local authority budgets have also forced schools to provide additional support to pupils without adequate resources. Schools funding has not increased with these increasing demands. In fact, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that total school spending per pupil fell by 8% in real terms between 2009-10 and 2017-18.

Many schools have either cut or are planning cuts across the spectrum by reducing the number of teaching assistants, replacing experienced teachers with less experienced but more affordable teachers, increasing class sizes and in some cases cutting the school week. Some schools have already started to narrow their curriculum offering and this is expected to continue, with many subjects being limited or taken off the curriculum.

The impact of Brexit compounds these issues facing schools. Brexit is expected to make it tougher to recruit qualified teachers European Economic Area (EEA) countries and from outside the EEA.

As funding cuts continue to bite, the quality of teaching and learning will suffer, and mental health issues affecting both staff and pupils will likely increase sharply.

There are particular concerns about the impact of further cuts on the most vulnerable children and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), who require additional support. With less support for these pupils, school exclusions have risen dramatically as has the number of referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

The cuts will only put local authority services under greater financial pressure at a time when they are already heavily under-resourced.

Many schools have started asking parents for regular donations to support the school budget. Unfortunately, schools in the most disadvantaged areas of the country will suffer the most as they struggle to accrue parental support (financial or otherwise), with the consequence that this will widen educational and social inequality.

What’s the main task that local governments face in closing the schools funding gap?

As local authorities have suffered huge funding cuts themselves, they have no effective means to close the schools funding gap. Some have attempted to close the funding gap in their SEND budgets by top-slicing

from their schools budget, which schools are obviously unhappy about and have sought to block through their schools forum.

The substantial SEND reforms brought in under the [Children and Families Act 2014](#) mean that SEND funding is completely inadequate to meet the scale of demand. Many parents are taking local authorities to court over planned cuts to SEND budgets. Defending legal challenges of course also costs money.

Could increasing the number of academy schools, thereby increasing the independence of schools in terms of finance, help to close the funding gap?

This is unlikely to work as both academies and maintained schools are impacted by funding cuts. Back in the early days of academisation in 2010, there were substantial financial incentives for schools to academise, including grants. However, those days are over.

That said, we are seeing many stand-alone schools joining multi-academy trusts (MATs) which have a greater degree of financial independence and means they can share funding and resources. A MAT can pool all the general annual grant (GAG) funding it receives for each of its academies and distribute that funding to those academies as it sees fit, for example, to support financially weaker academies in the MAT or to reduce the disparities in funding between its academies. Many MATs prefer to top-slice rather than to pool funding, though we may see more pooling of funding as funding cuts continue to bite.

It is also worth noting that while schools may want to join MATs for the above reasons, we are also seeing MATs reluctant to take on schools in deficit without the promise of financial support from the Department for Education (DfE), for fear that taking them on will put the whole MAT at financial risk.

More than 200 schools are cutting down to four-day weeks, or consulting on this. What are some of the concerns around four-day weeks in schools? Considering that the public can be prosecuted if they do not give their child an education, could there be legal repercussions for schools?

A four-day week will put pressure on parents and carers who will need to rearrange their working week and find alternative childcare solutions. This will of course affect low-income families the most due to the cost of childcare.

There are also concerns around disparity in educational experience and outcomes if some schools are cutting down to a four-day week while others remain open for five days. This effectively means pupils at some schools receiving 20% less education than others.

The most vulnerable pupils are also likely to suffer from a shortened school week. For many of these children, school is a 'safe haven' where they are fed, clothed and looked after.

Low teacher recruitment and retention rates are already a problem so cutting the school week may compound this further by putting more strain on a stretched workforce. Also, reduced pay may lead to staff quitting the school to seek full-time work elsewhere.

The law states that, in England, maintained schools must open for at least 380 sessions (190 days) during a school year. DfE guidance says that school governing bodies have the power to revise the length of the school day as they see fit. Academies have the freedom to set their own school day and term dates. As long as maintained schools stay within these parameters, it is unlikely that schools will face legal challenge or that parents will be prosecuted.

Are there any possible solutions to resolve funding issues for England's schools? How feasible will they be in practice?

The DfE has introduced a wide range of support to help schools reduce costs, but in reality many schools have already taken such steps and are only considering drastic measures such as cutting the school week as a last resort.

The only feasible solution is for the government to put more real terms funding into schools. A report by the Education Select Committee, just published, calls for a ten-year multi-billion pound funding plan to prevent the sector from being put under more strain amid rising demands.

Interviewed by Jake Whitaker

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