

A PERFECT STORM

Amid the woes of Brexit and the continuing troubles of the NHS, education is not very high up the political agenda and yet all the signs are that a perfect storm is brewing and that the system is teetering on the edge of collapse.

- In some areas, there is now a serious shortfall in school places
- For the fourth year running, the DfE has failed to meet its targets for teacher recruitment
- The wastage rate among those who are recruited continues to be a scandal: the DfE admitted in October 2016 that one third of all teachers who began work in 2010 are no longer teaching in state schools.
- There are now 100,000 teachers, trained at public expense, who have never taught at all.

Now we have a massive shortfall in education funding.

The Department for Education, which must by now have replaced the Ministry of Defence as Whitehall's least competent department, appears to be in complete denial about this looming collapse and fiddles with political vanity projects, such as the encouragement of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the opening of more "free" schools - often in areas where school places are not needed - and the expansion of selection, a policy which flies in the face of all reputable evidence from all around the world.

The shortfall in funding, estimated by the Public Accounts Committee to be **in excess of £3 billion**, is routinely dismissed by the comment that education funding is "at record levels", as if this actually meant anything, and that a lot of schools are having their funding cut in the interests of "fairness."

This issue is focused particularly upon the funding crisis. We publish some accounts by head teachers from various parts of the country, most of whom, quite understandably, wish to remain anonymous, of the impact of the funding shortfall upon their own schools.

But we begin with the conclusions of the recent report of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) concerning the financial sustainability of schools.

THE PAC REPORT

1. The Department for Education does not have the necessary arrangements in place to identify, and therefore act, if the actions schools take to make efficiency savings threaten the quality of education and educational outcomes.
2. The Department does not seem to understand the pressures that schools are already under.
3. The apprenticeship levy will be an additional cost for schools but they will only be able to benefit in a limited way from the funds.
4. In calculating the £3 billion of required efficiency savings, the Department has not assessed the impact of all the cost pressures that the Government is placing on schools.
5. The Education Funding Agency's approach to oversight and intervention means it has not intervened in all cases where schools are at financial risk.
6. Schools are now facing similar pressures to other sectors but the Department does not seem to be learning from this experience, in particular from how overambitious efficiency targets in the NHS proved counter-productive.

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

TALES OF WOE FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

A Head Teacher writes

Over the past two years the school has received almost £450,000 less in its delegated budget. This is predominantly due to falling numbers as local area "regeneration" results in fewer homes for families and there is competition from more free schools and academies.

As the budget has dwindled, and with the thought of losing a further 11% of our budget by 2020, I have had to be very strategic moving forwards.

Savings made

Over the past 18 months, I have replaced five teachers who have left with non class-based teachers, rather than recruiting externally. A departing Assistant Head has also not been replaced. *Cutting these teaching jobs has saved over £200,000.* Regarding administrative staff, a nursery nurse and two teaching assistants who left have not been replaced.

In the coming academic year I am looking to reduce 12 teaching assistants to 8, while the number of lunchtime supervisory assistants will be cut from 9 to 4. *These cuts will save the school a further £120,000.*

We have also given notice to as many ICT companies as possible that we will be unable to renew the licences for software programs that support the children's learning.

Additional costs. The new Apprenticeship Levy will cost the school an additional £10,500 and a combination of higher contributions to Employer's National Insurance and pay increments will add a further £60,000.

All of this is money that should be spent on the children.

In September the school will be operating on a bare minimum of staff.

This means that, if a teacher is sick, there will be no supply teacher cover because the new budget provides no money to pay for them. Instead, we will have to place a higher level teaching assistant in the class.

Another Head Teacher writes

Although our one-form entry school is in an area of high deprivation, we have low numbers of children who are eligible for the Pupil Premium. Nevertheless, we have high numbers of children for whom English is an additional language and many of our families struggle to make ends meet.

Although a small school, we still need to have a site officer, head teacher, and administrative staff. These

costs affect small schools disproportionately so we have grouped together with other one-form entry schools to see if we can obtain any benefits from economies of scale and to try to find solutions.

We have had to abandon all professional development courses for teachers unless they are either free or legally compulsory (e.g. courses in First Aid, Child Protection and Health and Safety). Because we have no choice about attending these, we are looking at ways to reduce costs. For example, we have volunteered to be a venue for courses in exchange for free places. This does not always work and sometimes we just have to spend the money.

Our inadequate funding prevents us from taking part in initiatives that we consider desirable. For example, we would like to join 'Challenge Partners', a form of peer moderation, but are unable to afford the costs. There are other projects that we have had to turn down that we know would benefit our children. If staff do not receive continued professional development it impacts on the school: staff may fall behind professionally and choose in the end to go where funding is better.

Schools are increasingly expected to do more and more for less and less. Mental Health and Relationships Education are on the latest government agenda but we have not been funded for any staff training or resources in this field. We have children who would benefit from, for example, some 1-1 sessions with a counsellor. Ironically, this is something we have been able to offer in the past - when it was not on the political agenda - but which we can now no longer afford.

We have invested in very highly skilled Higher Level Teaching Assistants some of whom we may need to make redundant. They are a huge part of the team because we use them to cover staff absence, finding that their knowledge of the children and of the school's expectations makes them much more effective than supply teachers. We already have a recruitment ban in place and we have lost staff through 'natural wastage'. This has reduced the quality of what we can offer, especially to vulnerable children.

There many are other things that more fortunate schools can do which we cannot afford, especially in the fields of curriculum enrichment and pastoral care. We cannot afford to take the children out on visits or to have professionals visit the school. We cannot afford anti-bullying workshops and even a school production is too expensive. The financial problems which schools now face will ultimately have an impact on overall standards and thus upon the future of our society.

Tales of woe continued – A Cameo from Greenwich

Plumcroft Primary School in the London borough of Greenwich has over 760 pupils and is expanding onto a second campus in the heart of Woolwich to provide for a further 420 pupils.

It sees itself as a diverse and friendly community school, celebrating differences as well as sharing joint interests. The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum but prides itself on its outstanding PE department and excellent music programme which ensures that all children in KS2 can learn a musical instrument and participate in performances.

The school faces a cut in funding of almost £385,000 over the next three years. Plumcroft is registered by Ofsted as a GOOD school, but, in the coming years, can it continue to offer the same combination of rich experience and high levels of attainment?

Richard Slade, Head Teacher of Plumcroft, thinks not and is highly critical of the government's education cuts. He said that just to deliver a balanced budget he is (a) not replacing staff who leave, (b) not paying for external supply teachers to cover sickness and (c) cutting support for special needs.

"If I'm going to deliver those kinds of cuts", he says, "standards are going to fall, the needs of the most vulnerable aren't going to be met and there's a point where my school isn't going to be safe because I physically won't have enough adults in a large school".

So unacceptable and crippling does Mr Slade find this situation that he anticipates that he will be forced to resign rather than continue to implement such drastic cuts.

COMMENT

The government's defence of their planned cuts to education is so feeble that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that there are unacknowledged forces at work.

First of all we have the parroted statement that "education spending" is at "record levels". Leaving aside the vague nature of the first term, the second, even if true, is quite beside the point. The question is not whether spending is high but whether it is sufficient when the school population itself is also at record levels. That there is a £3 billion shortfall shows that the spending is inadequate and that the amount being spent per child is insufficient.

Secondly, we are told that what is in fact a large cut is simply a redistribution in the interests of "fairness". It is undeniable that for many years there have been serious anomalies in the way in which education funding has been distributed among the various Local Authorities and the case for reform has been overwhelming.

However, we seem to have moved from a position where some areas received enough while others did not to one where no-one receives enough! Of those schools who will receive more funding than in the past, the majority say that they will still have to make serious reductions in staffing and the provision of materials and activities.

When pressed on these points, government spokespeople fall back on the need to reduce "the deficit", a term which the vast majority of people, including politicians, do not understand and which those who do deliberately use in a variety of misleading ways. The decision to spend vast sums of public money propping up the banks after the "crash" of 2008 led to a large gap opening up between government income and government spending – a "deficit". Faced with this, the government had the choice of increasing taxation or reducing spending. Since 2010, the government has chosen to reduce both spending *and* taxation, with devastating results for the poorest in society, the group who rely the most on public services.

The consequences for education are not difficult to foresee. The creation of a quasi-market in schooling since the 1988 Education Reform Act has already led to huge social differentiation in the intake of state schools. Those schools which serve the children of the more affluent will ask their parents to increase the voluntary contributions they already make towards "extras" to cover more essential provision.

Those schools whose parents are unable to do this will simply strip back their provision to what is most basic.

PRIVATE GRIEF

Labour's recent announcement of a plan to impose VAT on school fees - an idea supported by no less than Michael Gove - and spend the money on providing free school meals to all primary school children has drawn an entirely predictable range of responses.

Spokespeople for the private sector have made the usual claim that parents make "sacrifices" in order to afford school fees and indeed one parent on Radio 4 spoke bitterly of doing without a new car. A spokesman for the *Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference* stated that 20% of fee-paying parents have household incomes of "less than £50,000".

Hand-wringing metropolitans, such as *The Guardian's* Gaby Hinsliffe, demand "cast-iron proof" that this scheme will work better than "less eye-catching targeted solutions" (which, presumably, would also require "cast-iron proof" to justify their implementation). *The Daily Telegraph* is opposed.

Not much mentioned so far is that, unlike the very famous ones, most private schools are not very good at all. Also unmentioned to date is that Labour's policy may be new in this country but is far from original. Finland, which has Europe's leading education system, introduced universal free school meals in 1948.

DISCRETION IS BETTER

Jon Platt refused to pay a fine imposed for an unauthorised absence (a term-time visit to Disney World). He successfully argued in the High Court that his daughter's 90% attendance rate showed that he had been in compliance with the law which requires parents to ensure that their children attend school "regularly".

Urged on by the government, The Isle of Wight Council pursued the case all the way to the Supreme Court, where Mr Platt finally lost.

This is a difficult issue. Mr Platt has been able to show that there is no obvious correlation between term-time holidays and educational failure - indeed, if anything, the figures suggest the contrary - and he has more than a point when he asks why, if occasional absence is such a disaster, as argued by the DFE, schools are allowed to send pupils on term-time excursions and disrupt the timetable in other ways.

Schools used to have discretion in these matters and it would be better if this were restored.

NO SUCH THING AS A FREE EDUCATION?

This is an extract from the website of a very successful comprehensive school :

"As you will no doubt be aware, schools across the country have been dealing with dwindling budgets, and in the future will face further significant funding cuts. It is estimated that [our] budget will be cut in real terms by almost £700,000 by 2019, that's about £740 per pupil (excluding 6th Form). It will be the worst affected school in [the locality]."

We are providing your child with an exceptional state sector education, but unfortunately there is no such thing as free state education any more. Those of us brought up with this concept will find it hard to put such an idea behind us."

The school lists the various ways in which parents can make financial contributions to the school - not for "extras" but on what used to be regarded as basic provision.

More recently, parents have been told that Sixth Form funding could be cut by as much as 50%.

[Comments in square brackets replace information that would identify the school.]

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