



22 October 2022

An open letter to Conservative MPs about the school & college funding crisis ahead of this week's leadership elections

Dear colleagues

We write as leaders of national education organisations across the UK. Between us we represent and support the vast majority of leaders, teachers, governors, trustees, parents and support staff in our schools and colleges.

As Conservative MPs you have an important responsibility over the coming days – to elect our future Prime Minister.

In 2019, the Conservative Party made a manifesto commitment to restore real-terms funding for schools to 2010-levels. Instead, current forecasts predict a £2bn shortfall by 2024. This desperate situation will become even worse should further cuts be imposed by the Treasury following the October 31st statement.

We urge you to stand behind your party's 2019 manifesto commitment by seeking the assurance of leadership candidates to deliver on your pledge to restore school and college funding to 2010-levels, should they become leader.

A funding shortfall of this scale cannot be absorbed by schools and colleges without severely impacting the quality of education. Put simply, they will not be able to afford to continue to provide the education that pupils and students deserve.

It has become clear that schools and colleges serving the most deprived communities are likely to be hit hardest from funding challenges, at a time when the achievement gap between poor pupils and their more affluent peers has hit a ten-year high.

There are now parts of the school estate that are in a dangerous state of repair. The rate of school rebuilding means buildings are expected to last for 400 years, raising significant safety concerns. Not only is capital investment in the school estate good for children it is good for the economy and can help the country return to growth.

Leaders and governors are having to make heart-wrenching choices about what they can and cannot afford to do. Decisions they are taking include:

- Making teachers and support staff redundant – including teaching assistants providing essential support to children with special educational needs and disabilities
- Increasing class sizes
- Reducing subject choices – including no longer offering music, art or drama
- Cutting extra-curricular provision, including after-school clubs and school trips
- Cutting catch-up provision for children particularly badly affected by the pandemic, including the delivery of the National Tutoring Programme

- Cutting support for vulnerable learners with SEND or debilitating mental health issues
- Cutting attendance support, even in areas of high deprivation where this is vital
- Cancelling proposed repairs to dilapidated school and college buildings

The scale of these cuts is unprecedented, even in the context of a decade of underfunding of education. They will have a direct impact on the ability of schools and colleges to maintain educational standards. In some cases, they will compromise the wellbeing of children.

The funding crisis is the result of a number of factors, which have come together to create a perfect storm. These include:

- A significant decline in real-terms funding for schools and colleges as a result of inflation. Real terms per pupil funding is lower than it was in 2015-16. In 2015-16 it stood at £6,206 and in 2022-23 it is £231 less. School and college spending power is £1.6bn lower than it was in 2015-16, or 3.7%. According to the highly respected, independent Institute for Fiscal Studies, by 2024 school spending per pupil will still be 3% lower than 2010 in real terms. The situation is significantly worse for sixth form and FE colleges.
- Spiraling energy costs, which are only partly compensated for by the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, with even this partial compensation only guaranteed for the next five months.
- No additional government funding to cover essential pay increases for teachers and support staff.
- Schools and colleges taking on significant additional financial burdens to support children and families in increasing poverty.

Without a commitment to further investment, our analysis shows that an average primary school in your constituency will be facing a £35-45k shortfall by September 2024, equating to two support staff or one teacher; whilst an average secondary school will be facing a £200-250k shortfall by 2024, which would equate to around four to five teachers. These are average figures. But the next fortnight will see the relaunch of the School Cuts website, which will enable parents to see the likely impact of these spending reductions in their child's own school.

We would urge all Conservative MPs to consider the impact of underfunding our schools and colleges on the life-chances of children and young people, and on the government's capacity to drive growth to ensure that the UK can compete on the world stage.

We therefore invite you to ask the following questions of the prospective candidates for party leader and Prime Minister, before casting your vote:

1. Will you commit to deliver on the 2019 school funding manifesto commitment, to return funding in real-terms to 2010 levels?
2. Will you commit to increasing school and college funding in line with inflation?
3. Will you ensure that schools and colleges are able to access the Energy Bill Relief Scheme beyond March 2023?
4. Will you ensure that increases to teacher and support staff pay are fully funded?

This is a crucial opportunity to avert a crisis which will otherwise have a devastating impact on children and young people, who are already suffering the after-effects of the disruption to education as a result of the pandemic.

Education has felt as if it is on the margins of political priorities. That must change. During the pandemic, our young people made enormous sacrifices to protect others. They will not forgive us if their life chances are further diminished.

We write on their behalf.

Yours,

David Hughes, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders

Paul Whiteman, General Secretary of school leaders' union NAHT

Leora Cruddas, CEO of Confederation of School Trusts

Patrick Roach, General Secretary of teachers' union NASUWT

Kevin Courtney and Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretaries, National Education Union

Emma Knights, Chief Executive, National Governance Association

John Jolly, Chief Executive, Parentkind

Bill Watkin, Chief Executive, Sixth Form Colleges Association

Mike Short, National Secretary, Education, Local Government, Police & Justice, UNISON

Andrew Murray, National Officer for Education, Unite the union

Avril Chambers, National Officer, GMB Union

Roy Rickhuss, General Secretary, Community Union