

Large class sizes and “well below” average spending on early years education in UK schools, OECD reports

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The annual report by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance 2024*, found that, compared to 50 other nations, the UK spends “well below” the average on early years education.

The average spent on a child from birth to age five across the OECD is £9,700. The UK spends an abysmal £5,700. Investment in early years education as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) fell 13 percent from 2015 to 2021 in the UK, while rising 9 percent across the OECD.

The report reveals entrenched inequality in educational attainment across the age range correlated with family income and parents’ education. This is the case for all OECD countries but is particularly pronounced in England. In London, for example, 71 percent of 25–64-year-olds have a tertiary (post-secondary) qualification, compared to 42 percent in North East England where deprivation is high.

Not only does the UK fare badly in terms of early years spending—vital, formative years for child development—but UK class sizes across the age range are larger than those in Mexico, Turkey and Colombia. The average class size in OECD countries is 21, while Luxembourg and Croatia have 15 children per class. In the UK teachers struggle with classes of 27 pupils on average.

According to the report, the pupil-teacher ratio in the UK is among the highest: fifth out of 50 countries, behind India, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil. Yet in terms of GDP, the UK ranks sixth in the world.

Teachers in the UK tend to be younger than their OECD counterparts and therefore less experienced, due to the problem of teacher retention. The report notes that 9 percent of teachers left the profession in 2022-23, one of the highest rates in the OECD.

Education in the UK, like the National Health Service, is in a shambles after years of austerity cuts since 2010 to finance the bank and pandemic bailouts, and now to pay towards NATO’s widening wars in the Middle East and the

expanding Ukraine war against Russia.

An Institute for Fiscal Studies’ report, *Education Spending Spring Budget 2024*, revealed that “total school spending per pupil fell by 9 percent in real terms in England between 2009-10 and 2019-20...the most sustained cut in school spending ... in at least 40 years, and probably a lot longer.”

Underpaid teachers struggle to teach increasingly impoverished pupils in oversized classes. The workload is crippling and the curriculum proscriptive, not based on pedagogy but tests and targets, leading to mental health problems for children and staff. School buildings have not been adequately maintained. Some schools are verging on collapse, being built with substandard material. Spending on special needs has been cut into the bone.

The new term heralds a further spread of respiratory illnesses including COVID, with no mitigation measures in place though the technology to purify air exists. Neither are children in the UK offered a COVID vaccine unless immune compromised, unlike in the US.

Responding to the report, Labour Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said, “We need to get early education and childcare right so that all children get the very best start in life and all parents get the power to pursue their careers. But as your report shows, the gap in enrolment in childcare between rich families and poor families in the UK is one of the biggest in the OECD.”

Phillipson is referring to the correlation between family income and childcare take-up in pre-school settings. In the UK, the take-up is 32 percent of children between the ages of zero and two from the poorest families, compared with 50 percent whose parents are in the top income bracket. Hardly surprising, considering that childcare is not state funded before the age of three, and the prohibitive childcare costs.

“Those first steps into education are so important for a child’s life chances and the sad truth is that a significant part of the attainment gap is already baked in by the age of five,” continued Phillipson.

But talk is cheap. The Labour government led by Sir Keir Starmer promises to be the most right-wing in history. The “attainment gap” will only grow as more families are pauperised. One of its first acts in office was to commit to the Tory’s two-child cap on welfare benefits.

Continuing where the previous Conservative government left off, Labour has begun rolling out plans for free childcare places—progressive on the surface but only as a soundbite.

“I’m delighted that last week, hundreds of thousands of working parents started receiving 15 funded hours for their young children [nine months plus] for the first time,” declared Phillipson. Ministers also promised 3,000 new nursery places in England.

High-quality childcare with fully trained staff in appropriate settings demands substantial investment, not shabby provision such as converting empty classrooms as is suggested. What the government has in mind are holding pens freeing parents to work in cheap labour jobs.

According to mainstream commentators, the economy is blighted by “worklessness”—a drain on government revenue due to less income from taxes and increased take-up of benefits. Singled out to be pressured back into the jobs market are some of the most vulnerable—the disabled, many with Long COVID, and those suffering mental illness.

The response of the education unions to the OECD report was to issue the usual pro-forma criticisms of a situation they enabled by closing down all resistance among their members.

Welcoming the election of a Labour government, general secretary of the National Education Union Daniel Kebede said, “Fourteen years of Conservative cuts to real-terms education budgets are coming home to roost.”

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said, “The fact that the UK is among the lowest of all OECD countries when it comes to per-pupil expenditure in early childhood education should be a source of deep concern.”

Pepe Di’Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said, “Tackling the high level of child poverty in the UK is vital to closing the attainment gap. We need to see tangible action from the government as a matter of urgency.”

The OECD report trails a school survey announced by children’s school commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza, which the government has made statutory for all schools in England.

The survey, explained de Souza, aims to “better understand the role schools play in children’s development... If we are to create a system that is properly resourced and funded to meet the needs of every child, we need irrefutable evidence about what’s going on in our schools.”

This is said of a system that has been inspected to death by schools’ inspectorate Ofsted.

Like Labour’s report into the National Health Service by Lord Darzi, nothing by way of extra resources can be expected from de Souza’s recommendations. The Labour government has made clear its priority is to resolve the £22 billion black hole in government finances at the expense of the working class.

Like health spending, education and welfare spending, as well as workers’ pay, are considered a drain on profits and funds for government initiatives aimed at warding off illegal immigrants, national security and defence.

A recent program on Radio 4’s Woman’s Hour dedicated to SEND (children with special educational needs and disabilities) support in the UK revealed a collapse in provision. SEND children may have speech and language difficulties, autistic spectrum conditions, dyslexia, hyperactivity, or moderate to profound learning difficulties. Some children may have a mental or physical disability so severe they cannot carry out normal day to day activities.

Parents and practitioners spoke of the bureaucratic hurdles in the way of obtaining an EHCP, a legal document that obliges the local education authority to provide support for a child with SEND needs. With few special schools and councils verging on bankruptcy, many children even with an EHCP get little support. Most shocking, the program highlighted the fact that 11,000 children are not in school because there is no appropriate provision for them.

Asked how she would convince Chancellor Rachel Reeves to release funds for SEND provision, Labour Minister of State for School Standards Catherine Mckinnell waffled about schools cooperating with each other and reforming the school curriculum. When the program moderator asked the audience, “Are you convinced about what you’re hearing?” they answered with a resounding “No”.

An investigation by the BBC revealed that councils in England are facing an aggregate shortfall in SEND funding of £926 million.



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