

1 in 6 UK schoolchildren studying in schools in disrepair

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Decades of neglect and paltry investment in education have left UK school buildings in a desperate state.

Amid an unresolved autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) crisis—which closed schools due to the risk of collapse and initiated mass inspections—the Labour government is now concerned about thousands of “system-built” school structures that pose a real danger to workers and youth across the UK. Thousands more are in a state of general disrepair.

According to analysis carried out by the *Guardian* newspaper:

- One in six schoolchildren (almost 1.6 million) are studying in schools that either need major work done or are in a relatively poor condition.
- Almost 729,000 of those pupils study in a school that either the government or responsible body (such as the local council) believes needs rebuilding or refurbishment because of safety problems or the general dilapidated condition of the buildings.
- A further 847,000 pupils study in a school with a high “relative condition need”, meaning a large number of defects and deterioration relative to the building’s size.

The analysis is based on a report by the National Audit Office which last year also identified 3,600 system-built school blocks out of a total of 13,800 that “may be more susceptible to deterioration”.

As of its 2023-24 annual report, the Department for Education (DfE) now flags possible school building collapse as one of its six key risks, describing it as “critical – very likely.”

The report states: “While general deterioration of building condition increases the risk of building collapse, of greatest concern are buildings constructed post-1945 that use materials or designs that are past their intended design life and could be subject to

defects that increase the risk of collapse.”

There will be full structural surveys carried out on a representative sample of about 100 system-built blocks to ascertain the extent of the crisis.

Construction experts say part of the problem is that so little is known about the methods and materials used when the “system-built” schools were erected, cheaply, at speed and often with few records, after the devastation of the Second World War.

For example, Laingspan, according to Historic England, “was a flexible modular system of frame construction using precast pre-stressed concrete units... Designed to economise on steel consumption and minimise on ‘wet trades’ to speed up construction, the system went on to be used for other building types including offices and hospitals.”

Both Laingspan and Intergrid system builds have been marked by the DfE as of concern, after two schools were urgently closed—one following a wall collapse and another after severe structural weaknesses were identified.

In response to the *Guardian*’s findings, Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the NAHT school leaders’ union, said, “We have long warned that the school buildings crisis runs far deeper than RAAC. It is important that the DfE is very clear about the total number of schools affected and therefore vital that this work is completed as quickly as possible and that investigations are quickly scaled up based on the findings.”

The education unions have not lifted a finger to protect members and pupils from the dangers posed by the state of school buildings. No action has been taken to prevent members being asked to work in potentially dangerous settings. They have allowed the DfE to critically underfund the school estate for years.

According to the 2024 Institute for Fiscal Studies report *School spending in England: a guide to the debate during the 2024 general election*: “Capital spending on school buildings is low in historical terms. The three-year average up to 2023–24 is about 25% lower in real terms than the three-year average up to 2008–09. Spending on school maintenance and repairs is also low compared with need, with the [then Conservative] government having allocated about 40% less than its own assessments of how much is needed to ensure school buildings are in a fit state of repair.”

A DfE spokesperson said: “For too long our school estate has been neglected—but this government is now gripping the issue, ensuring our schools are fit for the future.” However, the new Labour government has offered little more. In the autumn budget, the government committed an additional £1.4 billion to the school rebuilding programme, with a further £2.1 billion to maintain and improve school buildings, an increase of just £300 million on last year.

In 2021, before the RAAC crisis, the DfE estimated that at least £11.4 billion would be needed to bring the school estate to a “satisfactory” condition.

Even work to remove RAAC is miles away from completion, despite three sudden roof collapses in UK schools in 2023. It is now coming up to a year since the DfE announced removal plans for schools and colleges in February 2024, and still 87 percent of the 232 schools and colleges identified as at risk have not had work carried out. Some 122 buildings need extensive work including rebuilds and refurbishments.

No strike action or any mobilisation has even been contemplated by the unions over this scandal.

Commenting on the schools capital funding in the Labour government’s budget, Daniel Kebede, General Secretary of the National Education Union, said, “The crumbling school estate is emblematic of 14 years of neglect by the previous government ... This £1.4 billion is a welcome first step, but more is needed. In next year’s spending review and beyond, we need to see sustained and increased investment in the school estate if we are to turn the page on over a decade of austerity.”

A Labour government demanding “ruthless prioritization” of government spending, and committed to an expanding military budget, has no intention of providing this funding. It will have to be fought for

tooth-and-nail by education workers. But the first opportunity for such a struggle was sabotaged by the education unions, who pushed through last year’s substandard pay award with the promise that Labour could be persuaded to reverse course on Tory austerity.

With its order of a 2.8 percent limit on public sector pay rises and feeble spending on school repairs, Labour has made clear the reality.

The UK school estate is in a dangerous, dilapidated state, with some buildings literally crumbling and many thousands still riddled with deadly asbestos. Requiring educators to carry on working in these conditions reflects the same attitude which has seen them recklessly exposed to COVID-19, whose continued spread requires (at the least) the extensive installation of improved air quality systems. Both are rooted in staggering levels of social inequality.

The fight for safe public buildings and high-quality education for all requires a socialist struggle against the hoarding and squandering of resources by the world’s super rich and armed forces, based on a mobilisation of educators alongside broader sections of the working class. Those who want to take up this fight should support and contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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