

In the know ...

In this article, Pete Henshaw reports on how teachers and schools are buying food, equipment, clothing and even toiletries for pupils living in poverty – and the problems are getting worse.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH



Teachers seeing increased evidence of child poverty in the classroom

A survey of members of the National Education Union (NEU) has revealed that two-thirds of around 750 teachers who responded say they have seen an increase in visible child poverty in their classrooms since 2015.

This includes an increase in:

- Pupils going hungry (62 per cent).
- Pupils without appropriate uniform or uniform in need of replacing (74 per cent).
- Pupils without the correct school equipment (64 per cent).
- Pupils who are dirty or unwashed (58 per cent).
- Pupils who are unable to participate in school trips and clubs (56 per cent).
- Pupils who are keen to cover up details of their home life (42 per cent).

More than a third of respondents told the researchers that they have bought food for pupils who cannot afford it, while almost two-thirds have bought school equipment such as stationery and a fifth have bought items of school uniform.

Anecdotally, teachers reported children coming to school hungry and thirsty – often it is worse immediately after the weekend – as well as students begging their peers for food.

One teacher said: “I teach in a very deprived area. Most of our children don’t have food at home. They are entitled to free school meals but this is the only meal they eat in 24 hours.”

Another added: “More families are accessing the food bank and asking for support through breakfast and tea time clubs.”

School uniform is another area where the impact of poverty is evident. The teachers reported common problems with pupils without coats or with ill-fitting clothes and shoes.

Another teacher added: “We have provided uniform to many children who are unable to pay for it. We pay for shoes too. We have even provided shampoo and basic toiletries to students.”

In the worst cases schools are seeing children with “bed bug infestations” and “rats in their homes”.

In 2019, research from the Social Metrics Commission – an independent body of poverty specialists set up after the government abolished child poverty targets and measures in 2015 – found that 4.6 million children (about one-third) were living in

poverty. This is 400,000 higher than official figures in 2016/17 and 100,000 higher than its own report in 2018.

When asked what solutions would be most effective, almost half of the teachers wanted to see improvements to family support services such as Sure Start.

At its peak, Sure Start had 3,600 centres and a budget of £1.8 billion. However, the Closed Doors report from charity Action for Children (2019) finds that spending has fallen by more than £300 million in the last four years and it is estimated that around 1,000 centres have closed between 2011 and 2017. It is expected that the trend of closures will continue.

The teachers also identified reforms to Universal Credit and better access to child benefit (20 per cent), improvements to local job opportunities (15 per cent) and local youth services (11 per cent) as being key to change.

Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the NEU, said: "Teachers on the front-line know only too well the effects of child poverty, as the harrowing results of this survey demonstrate. It is a sadly familiar tale, but we must not grow immune to hearing it. For every child teachers and school staff know of with broken shoes or who has not eaten, we can be sure there are many more in their school. This is the reality of austerity, and it is lived by too many children and their families each day.

"The government is so insensitive to child poverty that it has allowed it to grow unhindered. The scrapping of the Child Poverty Act in 2016 was a reckless act. It points to a deep state of denial about a mess of the government's own making."

- *Written by Pete Henshaw and first published on 26 November 2019*
- *Social Metrics Commission: <https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/>*
- *Closed Doors, Action for Children, June 2019: <http://bit.ly/2Mr8z7D>*

Gerard Walker