

Save our colleges!

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Over 150,000 young people are enrolled in 93 sixth form colleges around the country, a third of them from the most disadvantaged parts of the country. Sixth form colleges send more students to higher education than the entire independent school system and have a key role in providing a route to HE for working-class students . . . and they do this for £4,000 per student per year – as opposed to over £6,000 for sixth formers in secondary schools or academies, and around £14,000 for sixth formers in private schools.

But sixth form colleges saw their funding cut by 14 per cent in real terms under the Coalition. Over 70 per cent have dropped courses and over 80 per cent have increased class sizes. One third of principals say their colleges may soon be financially unviable. Funding for 16-19 pupils was similarly cut in schools with sixth forms - but the effect has been much more stark in colleges. These cuts mean that there are fewer teachers in sixth form colleges, and those that are left must work much harder to compensate.

The Chancellor's 'funding per pupil protection' for schools and colleges for the next four years, announced in the Autumn Spending Review, means that inflation will further cut funding for both sectors, by around 8 per cent in real terms. These cuts are going to bite very hard in schools – but the situation is already dire in sixth form colleges.

Even more galling is the Government's willingness to oversee a distorted allocation of post-16 spending. According to the Sixth Form Colleges' Association, the 93 sixth form colleges have lost £100 million of annual funding since 2010. In contrast, the Government agreed to allocate £45 million to establish just one 16-19 free school in Westminster at a cost of about £90,000 for each student.

Sixth form colleges represent a second chance at education for thousands of 16-19 year-olds. The

Government has already cut them to the point where they can barely function. The ultimate goal, as things stand, seems to be the destruction of this sector altogether.

The threat posed by this lack of funding is exacerbated by the Government's area reviews of post-16 provision. That programme, which covers all FE and sixth form colleges, aims to establish 'fewer and often larger, more resilient and efficient providers' and threatens many sixth form colleges with closure or merger.

The NUT has been campaigning for the cost of VAT on goods and services to be lifted from sixth form colleges, since schools and academies are not subject to these costs. That would save each college around £300,000 a year. The Government has now offered colleges a route to avoid paying VAT . . . by becoming academies. Many principals are looking towards academisation as an escape route – but that will only serve to prop up a failing government policy. The Tory government is asset-stripping the best performing sector in education.

The sixth form college presence at an NUT lobby of parliament in November 2015 clearly had an effect on the Chancellor's funding announcements; we were expecting an announcement of 20 per cent further cuts, but his funding freeze will still hugely damage sixth form colleges and schools alike. Osborne announced an 8 per cent real terms cut for this parliament. An 8 per cent cut is definitely enough to tip many colleges over the edge.

The NUT balloted for a national strike on 15th March, seeking a restoration of 19-19 funding to pre-Coalition levels; exemption from VAT, without needing academy status; and removal of the threats of closure or merger. 86 per cent of members voted to strike on a 44 per cent turnout. However, the Government, clearly rattled that the NUT campaign is exposing the catastrophic impact of its funding cuts, took legal action to block the strike, arguing

that it was 'political' and not about pay or terms and conditions. The UK already has incredibly restrictive anti-strike laws – and this government is taking things further by demanding minimum turnouts in strike ballots and placing even bigger restrictions on action in 'essential public services'.

The case went to the High Court and Nicki Morgan argued that this was a 'political' strike, aimed at changing government policy rather than defending pay and conditions. The NUT argued that worsening pay and conditions in sixth form colleges have been directly caused by funding cuts, and the judge found in favour of the union: the strike went ahead. This ruling is a very important victory for the trade union movement and will impact on other disputes.

Although the NUT was successful in court, arguing that the strike was not political, it seems to me that all strikes are political, and by trying to ban 'political' strikes the Government is really seeking to ban all strikes. On the surface, this strike was about defending teachers' workload and conditions of

service, but teachers' conditions of service are students' conditions of learning, and it is the damage to the education that students receive that really motivates NUT members in sixth form colleges to take action.

All 93 sixth form colleges were affected by the strike and 600 NUT sixth form college teachers rallied in London and then marched to the DfE to hand a letter to Nicki Morgan. Throughout the day, the feeling of solidarity and the sense that this a battle that can be won was electric. The campaign will have to be widened to schools, as they begin to see their budgets cut. And this attack by the Tory government on education is reflected in other areas – welfare, health etc. All this means that under Cameron it is becoming relatively harder to be young or to be poor. The Government accused the NUT for being political, but their austerity programme is deeply political and should be resisted wherever we can. As one speaker at the NUT rally on 15th March said: 'the financial crisis was not caused by teachers teaching too much'.
