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# Is your pupil premium funding being used to plug the budget gaps?



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By [Jo Phillips - GovernorHub](#) | 6 minute read

## The Sutton Trust calls for the funding to be urgently reviewed in light of its latest research into school funding pressures

New research from the charity has found that school leaders are having to cut essential staff and activities to make ends meet, including teaching assistants, school trips and IT equipment.



But also, worryingly, that the number of school leaders who report using pupil premium funding to plug budget gaps has increased sharply,(41%), to its highest level since they first began surveying on this issue in 2017.

We spoke to Head of Research and Policy at The Sutton Trust, Becky Montague,(also a governor at a secondary academy school in London), to find out more about the issues and to explore what governing boards can do about them.

## **Becky, firstly can you talk us through some of the findings from The Sutton Trust's School funding and Pupil Premium 2023 report.**

Our report looks at how the cost of living crisis is affecting school funding.

As you'll be aware, day-to-day expenses in schools are rising with inflation and the government has provided some funding to make up the shortfall, but it appears from our polling that it's not been enough to prevent schools having to make - in some cases - quite considerable cuts.

The cuts are affecting some of the nice additional bits around the school experience for pupils, so things like trips and outings. But more worryingly, some of the cuts are also affecting the core day-to-day activities in schools. We've seen a big rise in the number of school leaders reporting they've had to cut teaching assistant posts (63% versus 42% last year). This is a really important aspect of school support that some children will now not be getting and - as often happens with these things - the cuts aren't being felt evenly. Leaders in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes are the most likely to report cuts to trips and outings (68% compared to 44% in other schools).

School leaders also say they're having to make cuts to the number of GCSE and A Level subjects they're offering pupils. A quarter report cutting GCSE subject(s) this year versus 17% last year and 24% report cutting A Level subject(s) this year versus 16% last year - so the educational experience and breadth of the curriculum is also being affected.

## **Do you have any idea why these cuts are felt so unevenly?**

We don't know for sure but, for trips and outings for example, schools with more disadvantaged intakes often provide more support to help parents to pay - often funding some

or all of the costs for parents who can't afford it themselves. If you've got a lot of students in your school in that situation, it's obviously a lot more difficult to be able to cover that.

One thing I've also heard from teachers anecdotally is that the cost of transport has increased. Hiring a coach is now much more expensive and that's creating a fresh challenge for some schools.

### **You've also found that more school leaders than ever before say they're having to use pupil premium funding in order to plug some of these gaps**

Yes, that's right. This number is the highest it's been (41%) since we started asking school leaders this question back in 2017.

It does seem that right now schools are under a particular set of significant funding pressures. There were the extra costs that came out of the pandemic itself - for which there was some government funding - but not all of these costs were covered. Schools are also dealing with the issues arising from the pandemic, such as attendance. Some schools will be using more staff time to deal with these kinds of problems and that's an additional pressure.

We know schools have received funding via The National Tutoring Programme for education recovery but the funding has been nowhere near enough and is a lot lower than in many other countries. There may be cases where schools are bringing in additional support themselves to try to help with catch-up learning, we just don't know.

It's just been a perfect storm of pressures hitting schools in quick succession in the last few years and the impacts are being felt right now.

### **You're calling for pupil premium funding to be renewed in light of this, is that right?**

Yes, our concern is that due to these funding pressures, pupil premium funding isn't being used for its main purpose which is to support eligible pupils. It's clearly not working given that such a high proportion of senior leaders are having to use that money to plug gaps elsewhere.

We'd like to see a general review of the amount of funding that's being given to schools to make sure they're able to spend pupil premium on what it's intended to be spent on, which is raising the attainment of eligible pupils..

There should also be a lot more funding going into schools to support COVID-19 catch up. We know that the effects of the pandemic were felt differently amongst different groups and that the poorest children - many of whom are eligible for the pupil premium funding - were the most heavily impacted . We're calling for more money to go directly to these pupils.

In regular times, they'd receive this additional funding but even the standard amount of funding isn't always reaching them currently due to the wider budgetary pressures schools are facing.

### **Governors or trustees should be monitoring the spending of pupil premium funding - what should they be doing about funding that's being used to plug gaps elsewhere?**

I think governing boards need to take a critical eye to any situation where pupil premium funding is being spent elsewhere and support leaders to look long and hard for other areas where cuts could be made.

Pupil premium funding is really important, especially post-pandemic. We understand that schools are having to make incredibly difficult decisions but we ask governing boards to make absolutely sure that there are no other places where this money could be coming from.

The pupil premium funding pot might be quite big in some circumstances but it's important to question whether using it to plug gaps elsewhere is the best thing to do and whether there remains enough support on offer for eligible pupils.

### **In terms of overall funding shortfalls, governors and trustees reading this might feel quite helpless - what can they do about this broader issue?**

One thing they can do, if they haven't already, is write to their local MP and explain about the day-to-day challenges that they're seeing in schools as a direct result of the funding pressures.

I know it can seem a bit hopeless but I think it's important to try to get across to those with a voice about the challenges that schools are facing.

## Is there anything else governors and trustees should be aware of?

If you're looking at effective ways to spend your pupil premium funding, we'd recommend schools give their pupils access to tutoring via The National Tutoring Programme. We recently carried out some [research](#) into the programme which found that it's levelling the playing field for disadvantaged students who are able to gain access to the tutoring - which better off pupils routinely access privately - through their school.

It's also a catch up intervention with a strong evidence base, so schools shouldn't just view the original challenges in how it was first set up as a reason not to engage with it. However the amount of subsidy is due to be reduced from 60% to 50% (it was originally due to reduce to 25%).



We've unlocked a GovernorHub Knowledge article on [the role of the link governor or trustee for pupil premium](#) to support link governors to be clear on their role and responsibilities. It includes a list of questions to ask when monitoring and a template to use when reporting to the board.

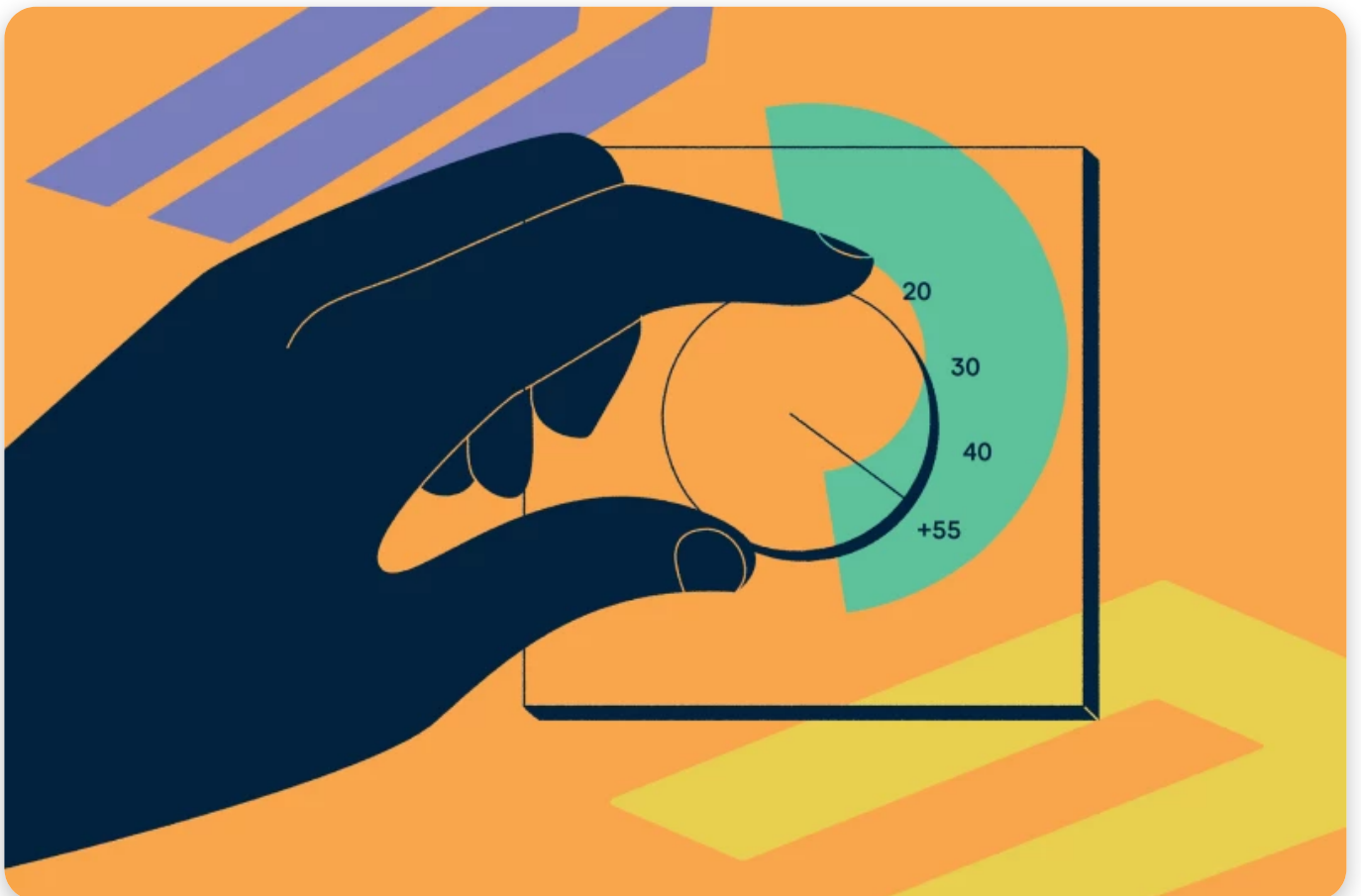
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