

Education in Wales: 25 years under Labour

January 2024

Education should be a central priority of every government, yet cut budgets and chronic poor performance have characterised Welsh education for too long to believe that this is the case in Wales under 25 years of Labour Governments. The question is, therefore, what can be done to solve these issues in Wales?

You can either complete the consultation using the response document or online at www.conservatives.wales/cpf. Below is a short briefing on some of the key areas but please do read around or give us your personal thoughts and experiences.

The consultation will close at midnight on the **29th February 2024**. You can submit your responses online at www.conservatives.wales/cpf or email manifesto@conservatives.wales.

Sam Rowlands MS - Policy Director for the Welsh Conservative Group
Laura Anne Jones MS – Shadow Minister for Education

Overview

After a quarter century of Labour running Welsh education, learners in Wales are no better off than before. Wales is languishing at the bottom of international league tables, the worst performing part of the UK on PISA results, and suffering from a widening attainment gap that threatens to leave learners from less-well-off backgrounds even further behind.

The sector has considerable challenges to overcome, including the climbing rate of school exclusion and absenteeism, as well as issues surrounding teacher recruitment and retention. Labour in Wales has offered no working solutions to these problems, yet have made the choice to cut the Welsh education budget in real terms.

The consultation will focus on the key areas that must be addressed to improve the state of education in Wales, with a focus on what can be done to improve workforce conditions in the sector.

Consultation Questions

Using the consultation response document answer the questions below or complete online at www.conservatives.wales/cpf

Question 1:

What do you think is the biggest challenge in education at the moment?

Question 2:

What do you believe is the biggest issue with teacher retention, and how would you address it?

Question 3:

How can we recruit new people into the education sector?

Question 4:

What support do you believe teachers and support staff require that they do not currently receive?

Question 5:

How do you believe funding should be prioritised in the education sector?

Briefing: The education crisis in Wales

Welsh Government priorities

A successful and effective education system is a vital foundation for a nation's economy, the quality of life of its people, and the longevity of its institutions. It is the means through which opportunity and fulfilment are provided to all, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background, and is therefore the key to breaking down barriers and unlocking the potential of every individual – giving them the best possible chances in life.

However, under Labour here in Wales we have seen the undermining of our learner's aspirations with a crumbling workforce, lack of resources, and Welsh Government Ministers at the helm whose priorities are worlds apart from our educators.

Laura Anne Jones MS has established a Policy Board with experts from the education sector to explore four key areas where change is needed to improve the state of education in Wales. These areas are the following:

- Workforce retention, training and career progression
- Recruitment
- Measures to improve working conditions
- Funding

The challenges faced by the education workforce in Wales

Workforce retention and recruitment

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) have noted that there continues to be evidence of recruitment and retention challenges in various areas, including teachers of 'shortage subjects' such as Welsh, Maths, Science and Modern Foreign Languages. There is also an acute challenge for Welsh-medium schools and schools in areas of high levels of disadvantage.

Teaching unions have expressed concern about recruitment and retention, with it being characterised as a 'crisis'. Findings from the NASUWT's 2023 Big Question Survey have shown that nearly three-quarters of teachers in Wales had seriously considered leaving the teaching profession over the previous 12 months. The 2021 Workforce Survey by the EWC also found that 16% of school teachers intended to leave the profession within the next three years and the NFER's Workforce Report has found that less experienced teachers have higher leaving rates than their more experienced counterparts.

Working conditions

The Welsh Government have themselves already identified workload and bureaucracy as areas in need of attention in their 2017 education action plan and have been included in their National Mission as a commitment, yet neither area has demonstrated effective improvement.

The EWC's 2021 National Workforce Survey found that school teachers work an average of 56 hours a week, with 70% of school teachers strongly disagreeing that they were able to manage their workload.

NASUWT's Big Question survey unveiled that 78% of teachers in Wales believe that individuals are being put off a career in teaching because of levels of pay, 83% believe that teaching is not competitive with salaries and rewards from other occupations, and that 78% would not recommend the profession to friends or family. NASUWT have attributed these shocking statistics to chronic underfunding of the education sector, uncompetitive pay, spiralling workloads and rising pupil behaviour issues.

A further well-established issue is violence, with Welsh Conservative research uncovering the troubling extent of classroom violence across Wales, with at least 5,000 recorded cases of violence against school staff between 2018 and 2022.

Training and career progression

The EWC have identified professional learning as an important factor in aiding the retention of teachers.

Estyn's report on regional working, Wales' independent review of educational leadership and the Welsh Government's practitioner survey, all from 2022, suggested significant shortcomings in the availability, consistency and quality of professional support for teachers.

Hundreds of teaching assistants have said that they do not have adequate training to deliver the Curriculum for Wales, according to research carried out by their union Unison. In a recent survey, two-thirds of participants have said that they have not received enough training to deliver the curriculum – whilst others have said that INSET days, which are meant to be used for staff training, have at times been used for cleaning classrooms and doing photocopying.

Funding

Over £100 million has been cut from the Welsh education and language budget – comprising of an almost £75 million cut to the revenue budget and £40 million to the capital budget.

Cuts were made to areas such as the budget for provision of universal free school meals, higher education student support grants, the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme and initial teacher education incentives.

The Welsh Government Minister made a revised offer to teachers comprising of an uplift of 5% to all statutory salary points on all pay scales and for all allowances from September 2023, alongside further clarification of teacher's terms and conditions.