

## Oversubscribed state schools have no room for private pupils

**At least 27 local authorities are full in certain age cohorts, raising fears that schools would struggle to cope with an influx after Labour's VAT raid**

State schools have no spare spaces in some year groups across dozens of councils, prompting fears they would struggle to cope with increased demand due to Labour's tax raid on private schools.

Figures obtained by The Times show that at least 27 local authorities are already oversubscribed in certain age cohorts.

Across England, Years 7 and 8 have the lowest spare capacity, meaning the strain on state schools from any influx in pupil numbers is likely to hit secondary education hardest.

There are 87 areas which declared they had at least one year group with fewer than 100 spare places across the whole council.

Experts said the findings revealed there was little slack in parts of the state school system, which Labour has said should absorb the impact of its tax increase on private schools.

At the start of the year, the VAT break for independent schools ended, leading many to put up their costs by 20 per cent. Business rates relief for private schools is also due to finish from April.

Official government estimates suggest that the moves will lead to fall of 37,000 in pupil numbers at private schools. Given the increase in fees, 35,000 are expected to seek a space in the state sector instead.

Ministers have stressed that nationally there is enough capacity to absorb any transfer in pupils, and that thousands of children every year move between the state and private system.

Nationally there are 578,000 unfilled places in primary schools and 465,000 unfilled places in secondary schools. Some 83 per cent of primary schools have at least one spare space, while for secondary school it was 77 per cent.

However, figures released under freedom of information laws show that some councils have warned they have no spare spaces in certain year groups.

Campaigners against Labour's tax plan said the figures raised doubt about whether there would be enough spare state school spaces in the right areas and year groups.

In 20 areas, Year 7 is already oversubscribed, with a further two local authorities declaring they have zero spare spaces. In Year 8, the figure was 13 — including areas such as Sutton, North Tyneside and Kensington & Chelsea.

The figures may also make concerning reading for parents of children in primary state schools preparing to move to secondary ones.

The figures come from a survey of school capacity carried out by the Department for Education for the academic year 2022-23, the most recent it has data for. However, the breakdown by year group has not previously been revealed.

DfE sources stressed that schools sometimes had a greater capacity than the sum of all pupil places in each year. It said more spaces in some schools had been created since the survey.

But critics of Labour's plans said the figures showed there were not sufficient spare places in the areas and year groups where pupils moving from a private school needed them.

Julie Robinson, chief executive of the Independent Schools Council, said concern remained that "there might not be the right spaces in the right places for children whose education is disrupted by this policy".

She added: "Independent schools play a vital part in their community's education ecosystem and we are particularly worried about how this tax on education might impact local Send [special educational needs and disabilities] provision, as well as young people's access to faith, bilingual or single-sex schools."

Neil O'Brien, the Conservatives' shadow schools minister, said the increased tax pressure on private schools would particularly hit children with special needs.

He said: "It will make it harder for parents to get into their preferred school. And the families pushed out of independent schools won't be the most affluent but families and communities who aren't rich and are really stretching themselves to invest in education.

"This is so counterproductive. We can now see that in many places it will create huge pressure on state schools."

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