

Joint article by Archbishop Justin Welby and Bishop Paul Butler in TES today.

For many of us this time of year brings that 'back to school feeling' no matter how old we are. Whilst this year has been difficult for children, teachers and parents, we have seen many heroes come together to look after our young people; from Marcus Rashford's free school meals campaign to Norwich Diocese's 'Filling the Gap' Project, which provided 128 families with a staggering 26,082 meals over six weeks.

The circumstances of the past year have meant that many have needed extra support. According to research by the Trussell Trust, 46,000 food parcels will need to be provided by their network to people in crisis between October and December 2020 – an increase of 61% on last year. Their estimate that an additional 670,000 people will be destitute by the end of the year is harrowing.

The response to the difficulties that families are facing has been overwhelming. Churches and schools, clergy and teachers, have gone above and beyond to support the people in their communities, many of them places of serious deprivation.

From the churches who have funded the provision of subsidised mental health counselling in schools, to those who have run staycation programmes to engage families and young people in fun and safe activities – they have been a light in the darkness of the pandemic. They are offering hope and joy in tough circumstances. Just so, we are indebted to the teachers, cleaners, catering staff, administration staff and others who have worked tirelessly in incredibly difficult conditions, doing work that is often unseen and un-thanked.

These staff are dealing with daily changing situations, with constant uncertainties and are in many cases exhausted by the practicalities of dealing with Covid-19 cases in schools.

Yet they continue to show up, not just providing education but caring for the whole individual. Schools like St Mark's secondary school in Bath where 20% of students attend a breakfast club, or Baltonsburgh VC Primary school which has been coordinating food vouchers for those most in need are truly fulfilling Christ's call to love our neighbour.

Almost five thousand Church of England schools are attended by approximately a million children, seeking to meet every pupil where they are and love every child as they are. Their care for those they look after in the most difficult and stressful circumstances is inspiring and humbling.

It will be vital for those most disadvantaged that these schools remain open, providing free school meals where economic downturn has been severe, looking out for those who don't enjoy a safe and secure home, and giving our children the opportunity to learn, develop and play together.

Teachers can only do so much on their own: all schools must have the appropriate resources to be able to address issues of child hunger and poverty and expand their role as places of security for children who are at risk, whilst maintaining safety at school. This includes the expansion of free school meals to every child whose family is on universal credit, and the expansion of holiday provision to all children on free school meals.

A Nature Premium would also be a valuable development. Outdoor play, exercise and access to nature are vital to healthy learning. Helping schools ensure outside activities continue will aid mental as well as physical health.

This can't just be plucked out of thin air; schools and their staff are already at their limits when it comes to time and funding.

Our teachers are doing their best for us, and we need to do our best for them. We call on the Government to make the necessary funding available to all schools; funding that is generous enough for all school sponsors of every sort to recruit enough oversight and train and oversee enough suitable volunteers to meet these basic needs; safety and feeding for all children and young people; extra educational support and tuition where that is required for pupils who have missed out.

Such paid and volunteer roles will lift the hopes of those involved as well as the children cared for. To misquote Churchill, "We have the tools, give us the resources and we will do the job."

Being safe, fed and in community are the cornerstones of a flourishing and happy life. By providing these we show who we are as a society – one which values and prioritises our children. It is our duty to teach a generation of young people that they are loved and cared for: by their schools, by society and, ultimately, by God.

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