

Plight of the poor relations

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A fifth of local education authorities do not assist 16- to 19-year-olds with travel costs or discretionary grants to pay for books and equipment - forcing many young people to drop out or make up the financial gap in whatever way they can.

Joan Francis has led a parents' campaign to restore discretionary grants in Southwark since her 17-year-old daughter, Lisa, started science classes at Southwark College. Southwark Council axed the grants halfway through 1992, because of a budget overspend.

A divorced mother of four, Joan continues to organise local parents on income support, despite being awarded 200 after appealing to the council about her case. She believes that all families in similar difficulties deserve such support. The ward will pay half of Lisa's travel costs for the school year. She also recently assisted students in creating their own lobby group.

"These teenagers start in the September, and they drop out by the November. The main cause of that is poverty," she said. "Another mum was on the phone to me, when the kids were enrolling, crying her eyes out. She couldn't find the 10 enrolment fee for her daughter."

Joan lives on 87.50 per week income support and must find 12.50 for Lisa's travel costs from that sum. Her daughter feels this money is being taken away from her younger brother and sisters.

"The biggest problem is that I haven't been paying the rent. I'm getting eviction notices now. Since Lisa has been at college the back-dated rent has run up to 1,000. That's how I'm subsidising my daughter going to college."

Councillor Anne Worsley, Southwark's chair of education and leisure, believes that in her council's case the dismantling of the Inner London Education Authority in 1990 left London boroughs ignorant of balancing education finances, which can cover up to half a council's budget.

"I realise it causes poverty," she said. "We know this because in the school meals system more than 60 per cent are on free school meals - there's a lot of parents on benefit."

About the team

Interviews by editors Jamie Burnett, 17, Tara Glynn, 16, Grace Udoh, 14, and reporter Selina Gibson, 13. This article was published in [The Guardian](#).

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