

Response to Labour's National Policy Forum 2026- Break down barriers to opportunity.
Fabian Educational Policy Group.

This response is part one (Introduction) of two responses from FEPG to the current LPNF.

1. What are the reasons for the increase in the number of young people not in education, employment or training since 2021, and how can Labour best support young people to earn or learn?

This response is from the Fabian Education Policy Group details of which can be found on our website at [.Fabian Education Policy Group | Fabian Society](#)

The TIMSS survey in 2023 reported that 48% of English 14-year-olds disagreed with the statement 'I like being in school'. This is the third highest figure amongst all the countries in the survey. These findings are consistent with those of PISA which in other contexts is lauded as the gold standard of international comparisons. The Education Policy Institute summarised these findings by saying 'the reported life satisfaction scores of UK students fell drastically between 2015 and 2022, to the extent that the UK now has the second lowest average life satisfaction of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries.'

International findings are confirmed by research in England. The 2025 Children's Society's research showed a marked decline in children's happiness with school and schoolwork. Their feelings about school represent one of the most significant areas of unhappiness in their lives.

These findings have been amplified through the recent publication of [Young people and work: interim report](#) by Rt Hon Alan Milburn. Whilst acknowledging the "heroic work" of schools and teachers "to optimise the life chances of their students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds" the report highlights the failings of the system for a significant minority of young people in schools. This is against a background of nearly one million young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK who are not in education, employment or training – so-called NEETs. As a part of this review the report "[Inside the mind of a young NEET](#)" was published which is based on direct testimony from over 400 young people across the UK. Chapter 4 gives an account of these young people's "traumatic experience of school" and of the associated scars of their school experience. These include the impact of being labelled and belittled in a place of humiliation and shame. For many their experience of school was of a "militaristic environment with rigid discipline and control". Associated with this was the pressure to perform in exams, particularly GCSEs, was cited as a major source of anxiety and mental health decline. It is a major failure of the [Curriculum and Assessment Review \(CAR\)](#) group that it did not acknowledge the nature nor the extent of this problem in its final report.

The development of such draconian behaviour policies is a direct legacy of the Gove-Gibb version of the "knowledge rich curriculum" that is based on [Core Knowledge](#) imported from the USA and its associated heavy emphasis on cognitive science and overly punitive behaviour management policies. Such approaches are ongoing with investigations recently launched by Cornwall Council into the impact of the extremely strict school behaviour

policies on pupils' mental health by the Athena Multi Academy Trust over recent years. This follows the sudden departure of the CEO of the Athena MAT and comes just a few months after a similar safeguarding investigation by Hackney Council in London.

The Core Knowledge approach has been accompanied by a strong emphasis on 'retrieval practice' which is an instructional principle from cognitive science. This involves a set of practices and techniques for recalling something previously learned from long term memory. As often as not this results in a dogmatic approach to pedagogical practice based on recipes and formulas. The influence of this approach remains despite the welcome emphasis on 'powerful knowledge' by the CAR group in its final report.

The development of Core Knowledge/cognitive science approach since 2010 has seen [the demise of subject specific teacher education](#) following the brutal enforcement of the highly controversial [ITTECF framework](#) which baked in this approach to the suite of national professional qualifications in England— see also the FEPG blog post "[Addressing the crisis in the professional education and development of teachers in England](#)". With this development has come the risk of '[lethal mutations](#)' that can arise from such a generic framework when instructional practices underpinned by cognitive science and intended for realisation within subject communities are instead conceived of and applied in generic ways - see the FEPG blog post [The 'knowledge-rich' curriculum in England: history, evolution, tensions and associated risks of 'lethal mutations'](#). In subject terms such an approach can reduce mathematics simply to memorisation based on the reinforcement of rule-following, memorisation of strict procedures and algorithmic memorised reasoning. Such an approach causes the lethal mutation of the subject content into knowledge of low 'epistemic quality' which in turn leads to [boredom, alienation and anxiety](#) resulting in student disengagement from learning.

This presents a stark contrast to the true nature of what it means to be a mathematician which Paul Lockhart describes vividly in "[A Mathematician's Lament: How School Cheats Us Out of Our Most Fascinating and Imaginative Art Form](#)". The focus of this lament is on the nature of mathematics as an art and on the role of the mathematician as being "like painter or poet, as a maker of patterns". In doing so it raises questions about how the curriculum can build on children's "natural curiosity and love of pattern-making" rather than undermine it by prioritizing rote memorisation, algorithmic thinking and right or wrong answers in school. Learning mathematics is not simply a cognitive activity about the head. It is also an affective human activity about the heart involving emotions and is about the senses in relation to how we see mathematically. So many 16- to 24-year-old young people have had the tragic and unnecessary experience of the mutated version of mathematics because of the misguided and counter-productive policies of the Gove-Gibb era.

Accordingly, our recommendations to Labour are as follows:

- A. The Labour government needs to reconcile the failure of the CAR Review group to recognise the issues highlighted in the report by Rt Hon Alan Milburn.
- B. The Labour government needs to review the extent to which the Gove-Gibb version of the "knowledge-rich curriculum" continues to exert an undue influence on the National Curriculum in England.

C. The Labour government needs to initiate a review into the suite of national professional qualifications in England starting with the [Teachers' Standards](#) and including the [ITTECF framework](#) which is enforced by Ofsted – see also Hudson and Outhwaite (2025).

Reference

Hudson, B. and Outhwaite, D. (2025) Addressing the crisis in the professional education and development of teachers in England, *Fabian Education Policy Group Review*, Vol. 1., Issue 1, 25-30. ISSN 2977-8387.

<https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Fabian-Review-Issue-1-.pdf>

2. What reforms are needed to break down barriers to opportunity for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, including young disabled people?

Inclusion has to be the aim. We are in agreement with the RISE initiatives in so far as they signpost the aspiration for a universal SEND provision including CPD, access to inclusion in practice, Nuffield Early Learning Intervention, Alternative provision specialist taskforces, and professional qualifications for SENCOS, Teachers, and TA's. (Including SEN TA's, and HLTA's)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rise-support-for-inclusive-mainstream-education/rise-support-for-inclusive-mainstream-education>

However these professional qualifications need to be mandatory not optional. It is our experience that teachers and TA's supporting disabled young people are not adequately trained at present and feel that they do not have the expertise to support the young people they are designated to assist. This impacts on parental and learners' perception of support in mainstream schools and often results in alternative provision pathways being considered. Income streams for the funding of TA's in the light of the government's white paper need to be reviewed.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66e31878718edd81771316c5/Use_of_teaching_assistants_in_schools_research_report.pdf

We welcome the work of 'Inclusive futures', for instance, in progressing entitlements for disabled children.

<https://inclusivefutures.org/including-children-with-disabilities-at-school/>

3. What role can youth services play in supporting our young people and equipping them with guidance and support to step into the world of work?

Again we are in broad agreement with the recent work presented by the government on this.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-worker-interactions-with-other-sectors-better-understanding-multi-agency-working-to-support-young-people/youth-worker-interactions>

However we note that funding for Youth services has been significantly cut since 2010. Without reinvestment the sector will be very hard pressed to deliver the sentiments and aspiration in the above report.

As YMCA state in a recent report:

<https://ymca.org.uk/local-authority-funding-for-youth-services-sees-biggest-annual-cut-in-almost-a-decade-new-ymca-analysis-reveals/>

The amount spent on youth services by local authorities in England and Wales has fallen by 10% in a single year, marking the largest annual reduction since 2016–17, according to [new analysis published today by YMCA England & Wales](#).

YMCA's annual report into youth service funding shows that councils in England spent £419 million on services for young people in 2024–25, a sharp year-on-year fall that comes at a critical moment for national policy on youth provision.

Over the past 14 years, local authority funding for youth services in England has fallen by 76% in real terms, representing a loss of £1.3 billion since 2010–11. In Wales, spending has declined by 29% over the same period, and, comparatively, over the past year, spending has fallen slightly in real terms to £46 million, continuing a long-term downward trend.

4. How can Labour make progress towards its new target of two-thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning – academic, technical or apprenticeships – by age 25?

The Development of V levels alongside A levels and T levels is a good first step in addressing the historic divide and perception between the Academic and Vocational.

The scrapping of the 50% university target and the extra 800 million for FE is welcome as is the fact that:

‘Schools will play a greater role in ensuring every pupil has a clear post-16 destination, supported by Ofsted, with a new approach to a guaranteed college or FE provider place available as a safety net being tested.

Young people will also benefit from 14 new Technical Excellence Colleges, focused on high-growth sectors such as advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and digital – helping deliver excellent provision in these key sectors. This builds on the 10 Technical Excellence Colleges already announced for construction and five for defence.’

However FE continues to be the lowest priority for funding. There are significant cuts to adult education and a poor funding settlement for 16 to 19 for the coming year. This does not live up to the government's rhetoric on skills. AoC has highlighted that college funding appears to remain a lower national priority than early years, schools and higher education, despite the demographic increase and the sector's significant teacher recruitment and retention challenges.

Additionally, was it necessary to couch this initiative with further references to ‘standards’ and the rigour-related lexicon? For example:

'Raising standards is central to the reforms. Colleges will be expected to deliver at least 100 hours of face-to-face English and maths teaching for those who haven't passed those GCSEs, supported by targeted funding and training. To bolster the quality of teaching, we will support further education teachers with new structured professional development from initial teacher training through to leadership.

The government will hold the sector to account through the new Ofsted framework, and new Regional Improvement Teams in Further Education will support college improvement, including how they meet skills needs of their communities, and empower high-performing leaders to support others – driving attendance and standards.'

Although FEPG recognises the pitfalls of change management in the current climate of different providers and agendas we do think that the focus on matching the conservatives rhetoric has gone too far.

5. How can schools and colleges be best equipped to support young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), so that all our children can achieve and thrive?

The proposal to make mainstream schools more inclusive is the right one. But to be successful there are a number of requirements including:

- adequate resourcing
- monitoring and intervention in relation to schools that are not inclusive
- action on admissions so SEND pupils have access to all schools
- recruitment to specialist support services such as Ed Psychs
- ensuring local authorities have the power to place pupils and insist all schools collaborate in making provision.

In addition the issues in q1 are relevant here - a more inclusive curriculum, less testing and ending draconian behaviour policies.

6. What are the specific implications of policy proposals in this area for (a) women, (b) Black, Asian and minority ethnic people (c) LGBT+ people, (d) disabled people and (e) all those with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010? What are the implications of these proposals on reducing the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage?

This is not a particularly useful way of approaching the issues around inequality. Policy needs to be derived from data which identifies which groups actually under achieve and suffer from discrimination - there are some not listed here notably white working class pupils and some of those listed actually achieve well on average.

7. What consideration would need to be given to policy proposals in this area when collaborating with devolved administrations and local governments in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Following the guidance provided below would be a good first step. It is essential that there is liaison with the devolved governments and respect for differing policy agendas and views.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8078b1ed915d74e622ea46/PL13_Devolution_Toolkit_291116_SC_v2.pdf