

Report reveals UK youth abandoned by education system

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The Bow Group, a Conservative Party think tank, published a report on May 25 entitled *Invisible Children*. Using the government's own statistics, albeit selectively, it paints a devastating picture of a whole generation of young people being abandoned by the current educational system.

The report states that up to 100,000 children and young people are losing out on an education. It indicts the Labour government for failing some of the poorest and most deprived young people in the country.

The benchmark that schools in England and Wales use to measure success is how many pupils pass five GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) with grades A to C. In 2006, 59 percent obtained five good GCSEs, 14 percent more than in 1997. The report states that this has been achieved at the expense of less-able students. Almost a quarter (129,700) of all pupils taking GCSEs do not gain any grade above a C.

Whilst the number of pupils not gaining GCSEs has declined from 45,000 in 1996-1997 to 29,800 in 2006, this is misleading since many pupils are being kept out of the "no qualifications" statistics by achieving a single grade. The reports then add to this the number of those who do not turn up for exams, which is estimated at 70,000.

A closer look at this phenomenon, it continues, reveals that 43 percent "of pupils do not reach the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics when they leave primary school. The knock-on effect is that pupils are permanently playing catch-up."

* Between Key Stage 2 (age 7-11) and Key Stage 3 (age 11-14), 84,100 pupils make no progress or fall backwards in English—38,100 in math and 145,000 in science.

* Almost a fifth of 14-year-old boys have the reading age of a seven-year-old.

This is in spite of various initiatives and strategies such as the literacy and numeracy hours in both primary and secondary schools, and numerous initiatives spent to combat truancy. The number of unauthorised absences has risen by 189,749 since 1997. These include persistent truants, which make up 60.9 percent of all truantries.

A substantial number of those who have "disappeared" from school are those who have been permanently excluded and who are not accounted for in the alternative education provision of a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The numbers of those attending PRUs have dramatically increased "from 3,860 in 1997 to 7,080 in 2006." Of these, only 56 percent are entered for a GCSE.

Britain ranks 37th out of 40 in a league table of major industrial nations of 17-year-olds staying in full-time education. But of particular concern to the Bow group are the numbers of pupils not in education, employment or training (NEET) at 16, which is currently one in six. A large proportion of these engage in crime or use of illegal drugs.

The figures produced are indeed an indictment of the Blair government's education policy. But the Bow Group's use of them is cynical. Its aim in focusing on the plight of vulnerable young people under Labour is to advance alternative proposals for education and training that will only worsen the situation.

The strongest condemnation within the report focuses on the money "wasted"—e.g., on areas such as PRUs (currently £263.3 million)—and the fact that young people are dropping out because they are "uninspired by what they see as an overly academic curriculum, or a curriculum that does not engage with what they want to do, or the way they want to learn."

The authors of the report claim that the primary aim

of the research is the setting up of a national database to track what happens to young people of school age. This has been planned by the current government since 2002. However, their proposals to address the massive underachievement that exists is the implementation of a weeding-out process, through streaming and setting—by ability—which already takes place at 40 percent of secondary schools) at an earlier age so that those children can be identified for vocational courses and “hands-on learning.”

Current practice allows young people from 14 to opt for a vocational route of which three days are spent in school studying core subjects and two days on placement.

The main thrust of the report is “to raise the status and quality of practical learning in schools.” This is to be achieved not by giving schools more money to build the facilities necessary to carry this out, but by creating in every local authority “Enterprise Portals” run by small businesses—in return for an exemption on business rates.

One would normally expect a strong rebuttal of such a report by the Labour Party. Yet, even as a departing Prime Minister Blair boasts that education is one of the success stories of his administration, no reply has been made.

This is because the drive by the Tories for greater selection, channeling those deemed unsuitable for academic courses through setting and streaming and encouraging private investment, are policies Labour is in full agreement with and does not want to publicly reject.

The government is currently encouraging all schools to either become privately run academies (run by industrial or Christian organisations), or trusts, or to move to foundation status, which takes the school out of local authority control. Some of these will be able to establish their own admission policies; some will use selection.

Labour’s silence on the Bow report also suggests that, as so often in the past, it is already planning to adopt policies initially pioneered by the Tories. This time, what is at stake is the final reestablishment of a two-tier system, similar in all essentials to the old grammar schools and secondary moderns where, from at least the age of 14, academic education would be denied to millions of children.



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