

Dead End Street

Roy Blatchford

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Writing about his celebrated 1966 song 'Dead End Street', songwriter and performer Ray Davies said that its inspiration was his father talking about the 1930s depression and worklessness. Fast forward a century and the 2030s beckon, with predictions of fundamental changes in employment stirred by AI systems.

Alan Milburn, the Prime Minister's work tsar, is currently investigating the soaring number of young people aged 16 - 24 who are not in education, employment or training - NEETs in the jargon. Their number is just under one million, equivalent to one in eight young people.

In a recent interview Milburn highlights the fact that NEETs include 66,000 people aged between 16 and 18: 'They should be in full-time education, it's a legal requirement.... We just don't know what's going on.'

Well, those of us working in schools and colleges *do* know what has been going on since Milburn sat around the Tony Blair Cabinet table. In essence we have an examination and assessment system which has repeatedly failed the forgotten third: [ASCL The Forgotten Third](#).

Recent government announcements introducing V Levels from 2027 may delineate useful routes post-16. They do not address pathways through secondary education which might engage the many young people whose non-attendance patterns show what they think of being in Year 9, Year 10 and Year 11 classrooms.

Primary education in England is successful at engaging the vast majority of children to age 11. The seeds of disengagement take root early in secondary schools.

Lift's recent report and initiative to look afresh at how secondary education is seeking to capture students who feel on the margins is one place Milburn might look: [Lift Schools KS3 Futures programme](#).

And if he is prepared to seek answers in the private as well as the state sector, it is worth studying how a number of independent schools have radically reorganised their curriculum for 13 to 16 year olds. Bedales has been doing this imaginatively for a number of years, and Latymer Upper presents a compelling case for the end to a full suite of GCSEs as we know them: [Latymer Upper School Curriculum Reform.](#)

I currently chair the 'Essex Education and Training Task Force' and the 'Gloucestershire Education Forum'. Both are focused this year on reducing NEETs in those counties, and are testing approaches to effect change. There may well be other areas of the country doing likewise which the work tsar can learn from.

I recall Alan Milburn giving the National Education Trust Annual Lecture in 2010 - and his passion then as a Minister to make a difference to educational opportunities for young people.

It is to his great credit that he is still motivated by that passion. 'My biggest terror is retirement. So why do I do things like this? Because I care about it, of course, but it's all about what work has given me in terms of purpose.'

The 'Dead End Street' worklessness in Ray Davies's song is a national priority to resolve this decade. It is fundamentally about affording dignity to all young people - and pressing home the message that *purposeful employment is pleasurable, rewarding and key to a flourishing life* beyond their school days.

Milburn promises to report in the summer with some radical solutions. Everyone involved in schools and working everyday with teenagers must, together with the Prime Minister, wish him a positive quest.

Roy Blatchford chaired ASCL's **Forgotten Third Commission**, and is the editor of [The Forgotten Third: Do one third have to fail for two thirds to succeed?](#)