

School leaving age
Geoff Barton

"Never underestimate the power of an announcement," Mrs Thatcher is reputed to have told her Education Secretary Kenneth Baker, encouraging him to declare a national curriculum before the details had been worked out. It's the way we work in education - getting on with the day job whilst a volley of announcements explodes overhead.

We have covered under more than our fair share of announcements in the past week. "We've got to keep young people in education after 16, whether it's part-time or whether it's full-time, whether it's training in work, or in college, or staying on at school," premier-in-waiting Gordon Brown said.

It came as several other statements tumbled off the DfES press office conveyor belt. There were pronouncements about performance tables, the scrapping of online computer tests for 14-year olds, and plans to pilot tests that young people take when they are ready, rather than on a pre-determined day of the year.

Gordon Brown's statement about the school leaving age has met with a surprising degree of support, possibly as a result of our national inferiority complex at being ranked 27th out of 30 in the OECD league tables of staying-on rates.

"I'm a pupil - get me out of here," could be the motto of too many British teenagers. Eleven per cent of them, it seems, want to abandon learning at the first opportunity. In doing so, they form an unhappy club with their very own jargon courtesy of the Learning & Skills Council (LSC). They are the NEET

elite: "Not currently engaged in Employment, Education or Training".

Those of us engaged in writing interminable bids to make it through the LSC's elusive "learning gateways" - the passport to being able to offer specialist diplomas and young apprenticeships - will welcome anything that eases this bureaucratic hoop-jumping exercise.

We have to banish the ghost of ROSLA, the raising of the school leaving age in 1972, and hope that there really are courses out there that will motivate and inspire those who are sick of compulsory education. More of the same certainly won't do the trick. Otherwise we simply risk further alienating some young people via convoluted, over-academic courses.

When Labour came to power in 1997, our complaint was about the micro-control of education - whether through national strategies or blunt targets. One thing we've learnt in the intervening years is that learning doesn't happen through coercion: you can't force someone to learn. You can only create the conditions in which motivation and ambition drive individuals to engage in learning. They have to see what's in it for them.

That's what has been so refreshing about the recent emphasis on assessment for learning and the moves away from heavy-handed testing. It feels like a genuine attempt to personalise the curriculum and create something more akin to the driving test. You learn to drive, you practise, and you take the test - rather than wait with several hundred thousand other people for the same blistering summer's day to be tested simultaneously.

Then we had the leaving age announcement, harking back to management from the centre and a glimpse, perhaps, of the kind of leader Gordon Brown will be.

The architect of New Labour's education policy of the past ten years, Michael Barber, recalls in his book The Learning Game a political meeting at which Tony Benn was the speaker:

"In the front row, watching him mesmerized, was an elderly pensioner. During one of his cascading passages about education Tony Benn urged that "the leaving age should be raised to ..." He paused, and looked warmly at his new pensioner friend and then continued: "... be raised to eighty five".

Lifelong learning remains one of the Government's worthiest ambitions. One day we will surely look back and think how crude and simplistic was the notion that learning ended at 18 or 21 or 60, rather than being what human beings do endlessly.

But in the short-term, if we're going to overturn the educational contempt of our NEET youngsters, then we need to ensure that the right courses are out there for them, and that learning is something personal and relevant that they want to embrace.

Which is something we clearly haven't achieved in their eleven preceding years of compulsory schooling.

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