

Jeremy Corbyn MP, Leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the National Education Union conference, said:

Thank you for that introduction.

Thank you to all teachers for what you do!

I am very honoured to be invited here to speak to you today at the first ever conference of the National Education Union and can I start by congratulating you on the merger of the NUT and the ATL.

You've come together to speak with one collective voice. The old trade union slogan 'Unity is Strength' is as true today as it ever was.

And I want to congratulate and thank your General Secretaries Kevin Courtney and Mary Bousted for overseeing the merger.

Kevin and Mary: thank you for bringing your unions together, standing up for your members and standing up for the principle of education as a right.

And let me mention in particular the international solidarity work of the NEU.

I'm thinking of your campaign against private fee-paying schools in the Global South - particularly in Kenya and Uganda - and your support for Palestinian teachers working in such difficult circumstances, especially since the US chose to pull its funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

But I have to thank the NEU for another reason too. I want to thank you for inviting me to give a speech that isn't about Brexit.

I think we've reached a stage where even political journalists are getting sick of it.

What happens with Brexit is, of course, vitally important and the Labour Party is currently in talks with the government which are serious and constructive.

But I know people are fed up with all the other critical issues that affect their daily lives being ignored because of it and education comes towards the top of that list.

Education is the pathway to liberation – not just for the individual but for society as a whole.

But that pathway is becoming ever narrower.

For years the idea that education has value in and of itself has been in retreat, replaced by the more limited notion that the only point of education is to meet the needs of the economy or business.

That thinking has increasingly been reflected in the way education is delivered in the proliferation of testing and competition and in the culture of educational institutions.

And since 2010 this retreat has been hastened by the devastating effects of austerity on our education system, which has seen schools stripped back to the bone and university students loaded with debt.

The result has been a narrowing of what education offers to people.

Of course a central task of the education system should always be to prepare young people for the world of work.

But we believe that it must do more than that. That it must be broader, that education is a public good and that encouraging creativity, critical thinking and an understanding of the world is important too.

The language and methods of the market have invaded our schools and universities and encroached on young people's learning.

Academies and free schools have brought the private sector into the heart of our children's education.

But have they improved results? Have they empowered parents? You know the answer to those questions.

What they have done is introduce the concept of Multi-Academy Trusts with chief executives on salaries of as much as £420,000.

So I'm proud that at the Labour Party conference last September, Angela Rayner our Shadow Education Secretary announced that the next Labour government will immediately end the academy and free schools programmes.

I want to thank Angela and her team for the work they're doing on this and for setting out a new agenda for education after nine years of Conservative failure.

And at the centre of that agenda is the creation of a National Education Service which will be the great legacy of the next Labour government.

It will remove the corporations from the classroom and the campus.

Because we believe that education is a right not a commodity to be bought and sold.

The National Education Service will make education freely available to everyone whatever their age from cradle to grave - just like the NHS.

My great friend Tony Benn used to say that education should be like an escalator running alongside you throughout life, that you can get on and off whenever you want.

What a wonderful way of putting it.

And so we *will* make free lifelong learning a reality.

And we *will* abolish tuition fees.

And at the other end of the scale but just as important we *will* provide 30 hours of free early years provision for EVERY two, three and four year old.

A recent report from the House of Commons Education Select Committee found huge inequalities in early years provision in England.

And that has knock-on effects.

A disadvantaged pupil in England is almost two years behind their peers by the time they take their GCSEs at age 16.

Children who get a good start in life at pre-school do so much better in schools and beyond.

I want all children in every part of the country to get that good start.

School should be about supporting every child in our society to reach their full potential to explore where their talents lie and to discover their passions.

A healthy society needs the full breadth of talents and skills that are developed in those vital years.

At primary school in particular children need the space and freedom to let their imaginations roam.

Instead at the ages of just 7 and 11 we put them through the unnecessary pressure of national exams.

I think that's wrong.

And I think parents agree.

They don't want their children stressed out at a young age.

SATs and the regime of extreme pressure testing are giving young children nightmares and leaving them in floods of tears.

Teachers are reporting instances of sleeplessness, anxiety and depression in primary school children during exam periods.

And it's even worse for children with special educational needs and disabilities. One teacher said the exams "reinforce everything they can't do instead of what they're good at."

Why are we doing this to our children?

These excessive exams are not driving up standards but they are driving up stress both for children and for teachers.

I meet teachers of all ages and backgrounds who are totally overworked and overstressed.

These are dedicated public servants. It's just wrong.

They get into the profession because they want to inspire children not pass them along an assembly line.

It's no wonder we have a crisis of teacher retention and recruitment.

Forty percent of teachers leave the profession within five years of starting their training often because of the unmanageable workload.

And when the system forces teachers to 'teach to the test' narrowing down the range of learning to core parts of core subjects to get through exams that's not actually helping pupils.

We need to prepare children for life not just for exams.

These tests are bad for children, bad for parents and bad for teachers.

We need a different approach.

So today I can give you this commitment: the next Labour government will scrap primary school SATs for seven and eleven year olds.

And we'll scrap the government's planned new baseline assessments for reception classes too because they can't give accurate comparisons between schools when pupils have such different backgrounds.

Instead we will raise standards by freeing up teachers to teach.

Labour trusts teachers. You are professionals. You know your job. You know your students.

We will consult with teaching unions, parents and experts and bring forward proposals for a new system that separates the assessment of schools from the assessment of children.

It will be based on clear principles.

First to understand the learning needs of each child because every child is unique.

And second to encourage a broad curriculum aimed at a rounded education.

When children have a rich and varied curriculum when they are encouraged to be creative to develop their imagination then there's evidence that they do better at the core elements of literacy and numeracy too.

So I'm proud of Labour's Arts Pupil Premium that will ensure children can learn musical instruments drama and dance and visit theatres, galleries and museums.

Those things are part of what make us human and what bring us joy. Children should be allowed to be part of that.

The pressure heaped on primary children and teachers by SATs comes on top of the devastating impact of austerity on our schools.

More than 90% of schools have had their per pupil funding cut the first cuts to school funding in a generation.

Classrooms are overcrowded.

Support staff have been cut.

Children are losing out.

This is an attack on a whole generation who are being denied the start in life they deserve.

The shocking stories we hear speak for themselves:

Head teachers sending out begging letters to parents asking for money to buy basics like gluesticks and paper.

Teachers staying behind after hours to clean classrooms.

Schools closing on a Friday, as they simply don't have the money to pay staff or pay the bills to keep the school open all week.

In the fifth richest country on earth.

This is the reality of nine years of Conservative government.

And although there isn't a single area of the country left unscathed, the cuts are hitting the most hard up areas and the most disadvantaged children hardest.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities - some of our most vulnerable young people - are suffering particularly badly.

According to this union, special needs provision in England has lost out on more than a billion pounds since 2015 because of shortfalls in central government funding to local authorities.

I commend the work of the NEU in exposing this scandal.

And I'm very worried that children with special educational needs are being permanently excluded from school at a rate six times higher than that of other pupils.

We must not brush under the carpet the issue of school exclusions.

Yes, some children can be difficult. Yes, these problems are often complex.

But the increase in exclusions is being driven in part by austerity, as schools can't provide the support and they can't fall back on other services that are being cut too.

Look further down the line at what happens to children that are excluded, the harm it can do to their life chances, and the greater cost to society later on. We have a responsibility to ensure they have a fair chance.

We shouldn't think that the issues affecting education can be separated from the rest of society.

Children living in poverty - children going hungry - are not going to be able to concentrate in class, as the NEU survey released over the weekend shows.

And when other services are cut, it's left to schools to pick up the pieces.

Over a thousand Sure Start centres have closed. 4,500 jobs in youth work have gone.

And at the same time some schools are having to organise food banks for families who can't afford to feed their children because of the Tories' cruel Universal Credit.

We hear of teachers having to source mattresses for students whose families can't afford them and staff supplying children with school uniforms which parents are unable to pay for.

The circumstances children are living in have the biggest impact on their achievement at school. But it's easier for the government to blame the teachers.

So I want to say thank you to all those teachers - and I know you do this all the time - who dip into your own wallets and purses to make sure your children get something to eat.

Every single teacher in this room goes above and beyond what is expected of them.

I mentioned the crisis of teacher retention and recruitment earlier, and it *is* a crisis - a crisis which stems from the government's obvious contempt for the entire teaching profession.

You are undervalued and underpaid.

Because while you've taken a real terms pay cut of over £4,000 since 2010 the very richest in society have received tax breaks and giveaways.

Under a Labour government, the whole approach to teachers and teaching staff would change.

Not only would we repeal the Trade Union Act and introduce sectoral collective bargaining to improve your pay and rights at work, but we would genuinely listen to teachers and teaching unions about what you think is right for education.

We value teachers and we value the genius of teachers.

When we campaign against cuts to schools together, when we campaign for a different way of looking at education, we're doing it for the next generation.

We're doing it to ensure that there's a cascade of improvement from one generation to another.

And we're doing it because we want to *broaden* what education offers to the next generation, not narrow it down.

Because education is a public good, not a private commodity.

When all of us are allowed to flourish, when our talents aren't inhibited by circumstance or squandered through neglect, then the achievements of each will enrich the lives of others, and the whole of society will benefit. So can I say to every teacher: thank you for what you do.

To the support staff: thank you for what you do. And to your union: thank you for the help and advice you give us. When we work together there is so much that we can achieve. And if we stick together we will win.