

The 2025 Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture

The comprehensive revolution: completed or defeated?

Patrick Yarker introduces the 25th Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, which featured speeches by Diane Reay, India Rees and Fiona Millar, and which FORUM co-sponsors with the Socialist Educational Association.

As prime mover of the annual Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, Melissa Benn wanted to mark the first quarter-century of the lecture-series by departing from the standard format in this milestone year. Rather than offer a platform for a single lecturer, she invited three different speakers to reflect on the struggle for comprehensive education, to which her mother, Caroline Benn, contributed so greatly. Was the comprehensive principle established irrevocably in the state's education system, as Brian Simon argued at the end of the 20th century? Or had the sustained attack on comprehensive schooling from the political right wing born fruit, so that today's fragmented system – moulded by academisation, high-stakes testing and instrumentalist conceptions of teaching and learning – merely usurped that title?

To explore this question, an academic educationalist, an educational writer and journalist, and a teacher addressed an audience of some 80 people in a committee room in the House of Commons on a cool evening in late November 2025. Among the audience were members of the Benn family, together with long-time campaigners from the Socialist Educational Association, the Campaign for State Education and *FORUM*, and the MP Steve Witherden (chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Education) who spoke briefly in support of the comprehensive principle. John McDonnell MP also attended. After the main speeches there were contributions from the floor before the three main speakers gave a final response. First published on the SEA website, we are very glad to republish (in slightly edited form) the main speeches given at the lecture by Diane Reay, India Rees and Fiona Millar.

Undefeated; far from completed

Diane Reay

Getting rid of a majority of grammar schools was only ever an initial step on a long journey to a truly comprehensive system. Those of us committed to a progressive, democratic education have always known we are in it for the long haul. Genuinely

comprehensive schooling requires non-selective admissions, a common curriculum and common standards that enable the same educational opportunities for all, and equitable funding with no built-in advantages for certain schools or social groups.

In relation to admissions, a government committed to fairness in education would introduce policies that enable diversity within schools. That requires curbs on educational markets and parental choice. Otherwise we end up with the current situation where the working classes are left with the school choices the middle and upper classes don't want.

We are here to commemorate the achievements of Caroline Benn. Caroline, together with Clyde Chitty, carried out research in the 1990s which found that only 13 per cent of a sample of 1500 comprehensive schools were socially mixed. Today the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of schools educate 50 per cent of children in receipt of free school meals (FSM), while the most affluent 20 per cent educate less than 5 per cent of such children.

But more equitable admissions are possible. The grassroots organisation Class Divide have just succeeded in their campaign to change the admissions criteria in Brighton and Hove so that up to 30 per cent of places are set aside for children on free school meals at community secondary schools. This will make it easier for FSM children to obtain a place at the most popular schools, and proves that creating a more socially mixed school system is an achievable goal.

Chilling consequences

But social mix on its own is not sufficient if schools continue to segregate children in ability groups. All the countries that succeed in combining high achievement with a low social class attainment gap have educational systems where ability grouping is delayed until age 15 or later. But other more chilling consequences follow from segregating children from as young as 5 according to their perceived ability. Being a low-set pupil generates a constant sense of humiliation, and often results in an emotional attachment to what is antagonistic to academic success. So bottom-set children as young as 6 and 7 talk about hating school and finding nothing in the curriculum they enjoy. We will never have comprehensive schooling in the sense Caroline Benn envisaged if we consign whole swathes of working-class, ethnically diverse children to academic failure. Our current education system is producing resentful, disaffected young people. It is white working-class young men who grab the headlines, but the resentment and disaffection is wider. Paula Ambrossi, in her book *Bottom Set Citizen*, discusses how Donald Trump and Nigel Farage were consigned to the lower status non-academic group in their elite private schools. She makes links between their anti-intellectual populist rhetoric and the feelings of humiliation they

experienced in school because of perceived inferior intellectual ability.

A genuinely comprehensive system would not only be one that abolished selection through wealth or 11-plus exams, and ensured social mix in all its schools and classrooms. It would also end the stealthy privatisation of our schools through academisation. Academisation is a process of corporatisation in which schools are increasingly run by rich, white, right-wing men as businesses rather than public services. Academies have greatly reduced democratic oversight, weakened local collaboration between schools, and resulted in a fragmentation of the educational system. The academy project has not defeated the fight for democratic comprehensive schooling, but it has placed powerful new hurdles in its way. As one academy teacher told me in 2023, ‘the hope was always that schools would provide an alternative to the factory for the working classes. Instead, the academy school has become their factory’.

The impulses, desires, hopes and aspirations of comprehensivisation that Caroline Benn spearheaded are what we need to reengage with and nurture. Those of us who are education activists and campaigners have to work harder at convincing the wider public, and the current Labour government, that a good education is not made up of traditional uniforms: a deferential aping of the private school system that emphasises rules and regulations. Neither is it made up of endless testing and hypercompetition: practices that make English children among the unhappiest in the Northern hemisphere. In the latest OECD survey, our young people came 37th out of 38 countries for life satisfaction in relation to schooling. That unhappiness is driven by didactic teaching, little space for active participation in the classroom, excessive competition, and a regime of teaching to the test along with a narrow fact-driven curriculum. Relatedly, a good education that works for all children cannot be done on the cheap. Children and young people are our most important investment for the future. They deserve so much more than crumbling infrastructure, inadequate resources and the endless stream of supply teachers increasingly found in predominantly working-class schools.

Revive a public education service

A real commitment to realise the potential of all children requires that we recognise the potential of their teachers. Caroline Benn advocated that we empower teachers to make decisions over their work and its assessment. A truly comprehensive system would take a leaf out of Finland’s book and revolutionise how we train and treat school workers, according them value, respect and autonomy, and placing them at the centre of education policymaking. It would make time for them to work collaboratively, build strong, trust-based relationships with their students, engage in extensive professional development, carry out research, and work together on policies and practices that further improve democracy in education. In 1996, Caroline and Clyde Chitty wrote:

What needs reviving most is the idea of a public education service – a service that is there to serve society as a whole, under the control of society as a whole rather than a segregated host of institutions driven by the market and the forces of privatisation which inevitably means domination by special interest groups and dictation by central government.

Caroline and Clyde were looking back at the tripartite system, but their words conjure up the fragmented, undemocratic, semi-privatised system we have today. The last 30 years has revealed a propensity to keep on doing the same thing even when it has been shown to fail. For one, introducing yet another test into an educational system that is among the most tested in the world shows a decided lack of vision!

So the comprehensive project is very far from completed, but that is not the same as being defeated. Caroline Benn recognised the distinction between the education we have and the fully comprehensive education we could have. It is her vision of the latter that we need to continue to fight for and bring to fruition.

Diane Reay's book, Miseducation, was issued in a substantially revised and updated edition by Policy Press in 2025.

Recommit to comprehensive values

India Rees

Hello! My name is India Rees. I'm 25 and have been teaching in primary schools for nearly two-and-a-half years. I trained and taught in Salford for two years, and this year I've been working on supply across primaries in Salford and now London. In that time, I've been fortunate to gain a wide view of education: serving as a union rep, working with colleagues through a (painful) Ofsted inspection and visiting 20 schools since September.

I joined the Socialist Educational Association during my teacher training, and as I've become more involved, I have become both increasingly concerned about the direction our schools are heading, and increasingly hopeful that a better future is still possible. That hope comes from the success of the original comprehensive argument, led by Caroline Benn and others, which transformed education in this country. The reduction of grammar schools, greater inclusion, the national curriculum and expanded qualification routes show how much of that argument has been won.

Of course, I can't talk about everything I'd like to in just 10 minutes. But in every school I've worked in I've seen the intense pressure the system is under. My argument today is simple. Although we won the argument for comprehensive education, the implementation has not lived up to the ideal. The system that was meant to deliver it now needs renewal – urgently – if it is to thrive for the sake of children and for the country.

Primary impact and experience

Across the primary schools I've worked in I've seen the same issues arising again and again. Many schools are already in deficit or dangerously close to it. Nationally, 76 per cent of primaries and 94 per cent of secondaries are in the red. My previous school, a lovely, listed Victorian building, needed its roof replaced. We had leaks almost every time it rained – which you can imagine was fairly often in Salford. The final cost was around a million pounds. Even with the diocese covering half – it was a Church of England school – the school was left needing half a million pounds it simply did not have.

There was almost nowhere left to cut. Teaching assistants were already covering lessons well beyond their contracts. Resources were stretched so thin that, in my first year, I was told to 'improve my glue stick management' because from May onwards I was buying them myself! It sounds ridiculous, but situations like that are happening daily in schools across the country.

At the same time, schools are facing forced academisation. The government still wants every school to be in the process of joining a multi-academy trust by 2030. Yet many heads and communities do not want this for their schools. My previous head was frank with me, in my role as union rep, about how hard she was working to protect our school from forced academisation.

And then there's the impact on children and families. As a primary teacher, I see 8-year-olds worrying about standard assessment tests (SATs). Their learning narrows; their confidence dips. SATs are costly tools to assess schools, rather than aids for understanding pupil knowledge or attainment. And honestly, how many adults could confidently explain the use of semicolons versus colons, or fronted adverbials?

Secondary school choice then brings more pressure. In some areas, multi-academy trusts (MATs) dominate. In others, faith schools are seen as 'better' because of their selective intake. This trickles down into competition even within and among feeder primaries.

In areas that still have grammar schools everything intensifies. Local comprehensives are left with depleted intakes and parents feel forced to participate in a system they don't even believe in, paying for tutoring for the 11-plus as early as year 3. Even surrounding areas feel the impact of those areas with grammars. In Greater Manchester, only Trafford retains seven grammar schools. Yet the effects spill out into neighbouring Manchester and Salford. One Salford school I trained in saw a pattern of children leaving before they got to year 6 as families moved to Trafford to improve their chances of a grammar school place.

All of this – early anxiety, pressure, competition and labelling – takes a clear toll on children's confidence and well-being. The promise of comprehensive education,

that all children learn together with equal opportunity, dignity and ambition, is being undermined long before they reach secondary school.

Special educational needs and disabilities selection

We also cannot ignore the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) crisis. How can we have a comprehensive system when many children do not have equal access to their education?

In almost every school I've visited, staff say the same thing. They want to support children with SEND, but they simply can't meet the level of need within the constraints of the current system. In many of the schools I've been to now the staffroom conversations are strikingly similar. Staff feel overwhelmed, exhausted and guilty that they cannot provide what they know children deserve. And while understanding of SEND has improved massively, availability of specialist provision has not kept up. We need more resource bases, more expert staff and functioning external services. Instead we're facing multi-year long waits for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) diagnoses, other referrals and education, health and care plans (EHCPs).

Under that pressure, some schools feel pushed into 'soft selection', discouraging high-needs admissions because they simply can't meet those needs with the funding and support available.

Within schools, selection happens too. Streaming, 'intervention' groups and narrowed curriculum pathways limit the opportunities children can access. And while removing the EBacc as a performance measure is welcome, it is an example of plastering over the cracks.

For me, the SEND issue is deeply personal. One of my younger sisters was diagnosed with autism 16 years ago. The support she received at primary school was very poor. My parents spent years fighting just to have her needs recognised. When I look at schools today, despite all the pressures, staff understanding of autism is as night and day compared with my family's experience. Families and educators believe in the comprehensive ideal of equal access to a broad and balanced curriculum. What's missing is the funding and structural support to turn that into consistent provision.

Teachers and staff

And, of course, we cannot talk about comprehensive renewal without talking about staff. As they say, teachers' working conditions are children's learning conditions. When staff are exhausted, anxious and constantly stretched, children feel it immediately.

Across every primary I've worked in, the pressures on staff have been hard to ignore. Workload continues to grow. Micromanagement, particularly within MATs, reduces professional autonomy. The fear of Ofsted shapes some school decisions more than do

the needs of the children.

It's no surprise then that teacher retention and recruitment are in crisis. Last week, new statistics were published showing 77 per cent of staff report symptoms of poor mental health related to their work, and over a third of staff are at risk of probable clinical depression.

These are not abstract figures. I've seen them play out around me. At my previous school, several staff were prescribed medication for work-related anxiety or depression. When colleagues were struggling, this kind of medication was often suggested among ourselves as a way to keep going. When Ofsted called our school four months early I wasn't the only one to cry in the staffroom. Recent changes to Ofsted don't indicate that they have truly listened to the impact the inspection process is having on staff.

This feeling is hard to escape. On my social media I am constantly fed content from teachers who want out of the education system, or from teachers who have already left teaching and are offering career advice to others who want to do the same.

When experienced teachers leave, schools are forced to replace them with cheaper early-career staff who may not yet have the support they need. One school I trained in had to pause hiring early career teachers altogether from fear of not having enough experienced school staff to be their mentors. The newer teachers, or those who are still going, are struggling. Supply work frequently covers teachers signed off sick due to stress. Some of the placements I've already taken have been for exactly that.

All of this creates instability for children. Losing a class teacher mid-year in primary, or in secondary having a rotation of short-term staff, makes it difficult to build relationships and allow children to achieve the progress they're capable of.

The future doesn't have to look like this. We can restore trust by publicly valuing the work of school staff, not by blaming them for systemic failures. Teachers and unions must be listened to in relation to curriculum and assessment reform. Excessive accountability and bureaucracy need to be stripped back, including the not-fit-for-purpose SATs. And Ofsted must be replaced with a supportive, fair system of local inspection. If we want a thriving comprehensive system, we need empowered, respected teachers. Everything else depends on that.

In conclusion: three actions

The comprehensive vision remains the right one, and it's not been defeated. The early victories that shaped our system still matter. But what I've seen in classrooms, in staffrooms and across communities makes it clear that the system is at a tipping point. Renewal isn't optional. It is essential.

Three actions are key.

First, we must continue to phase out all forms of selection – whether through

grammar schools, faith-based admissions, in-school selective practices, or the unequal opportunities created by academisation.

Second, we must confront the SEND crisis with seriousness and urgency through proper funding, specialist training, statutory reform and investment in support services that families and schools can rely on.

And third, we must work with teachers, unions and organisations like the Socialist Educational Association in a meaningful way – especially on curriculum reform, workload and professional autonomy. Despite what the curriculum review lays out, the system needs far more than a ‘refresher’. It needs a recommitment to the values that made comprehensive education a transformative ideal in the first place.

If we choose to act, the comprehensive vision cannot only be completed. It can thrive for generations to come.

India Rees is a primary teacher and NEU rep. She is the Youth Officer for the Socialist Education Association, and active in the GMB union and the Labour Party.

Treasure, celebrate and support comprehensive education

Fiona Millar

I would like to start by paying tribute to Caroline and Melissa Benn. I didn't know Caroline personally, but her work has always been a great inspiration. Melissa hasn't only been a vital campaigning partner, but also a wonderful friend to me.

In preparation for this talk I reread *A Tribute to Caroline Benn. Education and Democracy*, the book Melissa edited after Caroline's death. In doing so I realised that what I have learned from both these formidable women is the huge benefit of combining deep principles with determined campaigning and scholarly research. So much of politics these days is performative, and there is a place for that. But to achieve real progress, simple sound bites must be paired with evidence. Happily, we have already heard important facts and research as well as first-hand evidence about the reality on the ground from our other speakers tonight.

In Melissa's book, Caroline's husband Tony Benn wrote of the perils of being someone with a high-profile political partner. I can relate to that. He wrote about her ability to hold an audience rapt, and to cut through verbiage and be clear about what you want to say.

So rather than descend into verbiage I would like to start by saying that the very clear message from previous speakers is that comprehensive education has been a huge success. Indeed, I would say it has been the most significant and successful education reform of the last 60 years. Certainly, far more successful than anything Michael Gove, that master of performative politics, ever dreamed up.

Of course there were teething problems at the start. But this movement, to which

Caroline contributed so much, successfully turned the page on a hateful system that condemned most children to failure at 11 and contributed to low education standards overall. We must never lose sight of that fact.

The comprehensive generation

In recent years I have become mildly obsessed with the educational backgrounds of prominent public figures. You may remember that some years ago nearly every prominent actor or Olympic athlete seemed to come from a private school. This was regularly used as a stick with which to beat state schools (and for state education, read ‘comprehensive education’).

Of course, the Sutton Trust research shows us that private school alumni are still disproportionately represented in British establishment institutions. But in public life generally something very special is happening. The comprehensive generation is coming through. The entire Cabinet was educated in state schools, and nearly all in comprehensive schools. The chancellor of the exchequer, the foreign secretary and the home secretary all went to comprehensive schools. In addition, the new archbishop of Canterbury, the director of public prosecutions, and even the new lady mayoress of London, went to comprehensive schools. As did major figures in the arts and popular culture, such as James Graham and Dua Lipa, who went to the same school as my daughter.

No one is seriously talking about resurrecting the grammar school idea since Theresa May’s abortive efforts to do so. Even Reform, which in one of its earlier incarnations (as the United Kingdom Independence Party) wanted a grammar school in every town, has quietly dropped that plan, albeit in favour of other questionable ideas, such as a ‘patriotic curriculum’. So, the principle of comprehensive education is here to stay. But if comprehensive education has been such a great success, why do we always act as though it has failed?

Celebrating comprehensive successes

When I was preparing these remarks, I put two questions into Chat GPT. The first was: has comprehensive education failed? The second was: has comprehensive education succeeded? If you weigh up both sets of answers, the balance is clearly in favour of comprehensive education being a success overall. Why? Because it is an inclusive system which can offer a broad curriculum and opportunities to all children without segregating them into different institutions, and it doesn’t condemn children as failures aged 10 or 11.

But if you are looking for reasons to see it has failed, they are all there too. There is still inequality in outcomes and a long tail of underachievement. The myth persists that

comprehensive schools can only offer a 'one size fits all' curriculum, dumbed down to the lowest level.

Unfortunately, too often this question about comprehensive schools is framed in terms of failure. That is partly because state schools aren't used by people in powerful positions, and in particular by people who work in the media. They have a vested self-interest in talking down a system they don't use themselves. This sets the tone for much of the rest of the public debate. It means we spend too much time on the back foot defending our position, and not enough time celebrating the huge success that comprehensive education has been.

I can think of at least two of the people on the list I presented above who were proud advocates of comprehensive education before their stellar political careers, but barely mention it now. The position we haven't quite mastered is to continually celebrate the great success comprehensive education has been while also arguing, as we do so often in schools, how we could be even better if ...

So here goes. We would be even better if we could close the current yawning gap in attainment along social class lines. This would take 500 years to close at the current rate. We would be even better if we could reform our outdated exam system, which condemns a third of children as failures at 16. We would be even better if around a fifth of children were not persistently absent from school (up from about 10 per cent before the pandemic) and if a third of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were not persistently absent.

We would be even better if one in five children were not suffering from a mental health condition and if we could recruit and retain enough teachers and adequately meet the needs of all SEND children. Finally, we would be even better if we could match the funding of those pupils in the private sector, where average termly fees are the same as average annual funding per pupil in state schools.

The fact that our schools still face these issues is nothing to do with comprehensive education. They are a result of the context in which we expect our comprehensive schools to operate, and of a lack of political hunger to make it better.

Reform is still necessary

The last time I gave the Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture was with Melissa in 2005. I went back to read our joint talk in preparation for tonight. In it I quoted a Labour MP I had recently met who was frustrated about the lack of an alternative argument to what was then a major piece of New Labour reform – trust schools and academies. These were the reforms that Michael Gove took to another level.

Unfortunately, we allowed the academies programme to become the alternative argument. Academies became the solution to the 'problem' of 'bog-standard'

comprehensive education. In fact, this hugely expensive time-consuming programme did nothing at all to address the fundamental problems in our school system. It almost certainly made them worse. It has left us with a lot of comprehensive schools with different names, but which still face the same issues, and the sense that no more radical reform is necessary. But more reform is necessary.

I dare say everyone has reforms they would like to see enacted. But I want to kick off the discussion with a few of my preferred options. As others have said, our comprehensive system is not truly comprehensive because you can't have a real comprehensive system if some schools are able to select. Too many schools still can engineer themselves more favourable intakes than others. This hobbles the other more inclusive schools in an accountability regime that pretends all schools are the same

In 2002, the former chief education officer at ILEA, Peter Newsam, later the chief school's adjudicator responsible for overseeing the school admissions code, wrote that there were eight different categories of school in terms of intake. These ranged from 'super selective' to 'sub secondary modern', the latter almost certainly full of the poorest children. In 2003, another great educationalist, Tim Brighouse, also a previous CBML lecturer, talked of the 'giddyingly steep pecking order of schools'.

Since then, very little has changed apart from the fact that many of those schools are now called academies. So, the campaign to end the 11-plus and to create fair, local, democratically accountable admissions system is more important than ever. Labour failed to use its last huge majority to end the 11-plus and, the way things are going, this parliament may be the last chance to put that right.

More recently, Simon Burgess from Bristol University published an important piece of academic research looking at the inequalities built into our school admissions system and examining how different policies might improve the chances for the least well-off children. Researchers looked at banding, ballots and quotas of children eligible for free school meals (FSM). The most effective intervention was a quota that would oblige all schools to admit 15 per cent of children eligible for FSM. By introducing this simple quota, it was possible to give nearly all FSM children the school of their choice while distributing them across the higher performing institutions with minimal disruption to the wider system.

I consider this an elegant and relatively simple reform which could be introduced in this parliament in conjunction with removing the right of any school to have a positive Ofsted judgement unless they are meeting a local quota for children eligible for free school meals and with SEND.

For better education, take fewer exams

Finally, I would like to make another suggestion. Our comprehensive schools rely on an

exam system which requires 30 per cent of 16-year-olds to fail an exam that was designed for an era when all children left school at 16. They are held captive by accountability measures that incentivise unethical behaviour such as off-rolling and curriculum manipulation, and that contribute to poor teacher recruitment and retention, reduced pupil attendance and growing mental ill-health.

I believe the recent Francis curriculum review was a missed opportunity. But it did reveal an unfortunate truth, which is that English students sit between 24 and 31 hours of exams at 16. Other high-performing jurisdictions benefit from far more balanced exam requirements. In Ireland it is 16 hours, New Zealand 18 hours, and in Canada's high-performing Alberta province, children only do 10 hours of external exams.

So, our young people are doing too many exams at 16 that aren't necessary. These should be phased out in favour of a final diploma/baccalaureate qualification at 18. This would be a qualification that every pupil could achieve at some level, which could include exam results, vocational qualifications, as well as personal achievements in the arts, sport, project work and civic activity. This would broaden what we mean by a 'good education'. It could make school a more joyful place in which to study and minimise the status divide between academic and technical routes. It would also mean we could finally talk about young people's achievement in more than just binary pass/fail terms.

Caroline Benn's notable work included two books: *Halfway There* in the 1960s and *Thirty Years On* in the 1990s. It is now almost 60 years on from the comprehensive revolution. We must never stop celebrating its success, while campaigning for more progressive reform towards a world in which all children want to come to school, and teachers don't need to leave the profession due to stress and workload. Towards a world in which desperate heads are not taking their own lives because of the school accountability system.

It is uplifting to go back to the words of one of the original founders of the comprehensive movement, Robin Pedley, who talked about school embodying 'a larger and more generous attitude of mind, a common culture and happy vigorous local communities'.

We are living through a time of so much division and fear of difference. A comprehensive school system, in which children from all backgrounds can walk through the same door in the morning, can be taught together and build friendships across divides, is more important than ever. It needs to be treasured, celebrated and supported.

Fiona Millar is a writer, journalist, school governor and education campaigner. Her most recent book is *The Best for My Child: did the schools market deliver?*, published by Hachette UK in 2018.