

Speech

Nick Gibb: the role of leadership in school improvement

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Schools minister addresses headteachers at the Brighton College Educational Conference.



Can I start by saying thank you for inviting me to join you today at your annual conference. It is an honour to be included on such an esteemed roster of speakers, though it is rather daunting to offer insights on leadership when followed by the likes of Charles Moore and David Starkey, biographers of Margaret Thatcher and Henry VIII respectively.

One of the advantages of speaking first, however, is that I can lay claim to all of the more obvious quotations about political and school leadership. It was Winston Churchill, in his memoirs 'My Early Life', who made the observation: 'Headmasters have

powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never yet been invested.'

Whilst this may be true of an English public school at the end of the nineteenth century, it would not apply to English state schools for much of the twentieth century.

Up until the 1988 Education Reform Act, the budget for state-maintained schools was reserved for only a miniscule proportion of expenditure - exercise books and school stationery, so the cliché went. Decisions on school meals, school maintenance, staff training, and school insurance all lay with the local authority. Even something so crucial to a school as the recruitment, appointment, and payment of staff was decided by the local authority, not the school head.

Only during the late eighties, with the arrival of what became known as the 'local management of schools', could school hire staff as they saw fit. Only then did decisive and strong school leadership become a genuine possibility in the state sector.

Since the arrival of local management of schools, the trend in school reform has been towards greater school autonomy, and greater powers for heads. And this trend has significantly accelerated since 2010. Our government has been guided by the international evidence showing that high levels of school autonomy, coupled with strong accountability, is a consistent feature of the world's top-performing school systems.

But one has to go further, and ask: 'why are autonomous school systems superior to school systems characterised by centralised direction?' My answer would be this. English state education was once characterised by uniform mediocrity, and a sense of resigned acceptance that it would forever be thus.

I remember talking to a consultant who in the early 2000s was asked to write a report on what could be done to improve London's state schools. So, as any consultant would, he set out to find case studies of those high-achieving state schools within London which were delivering an outstanding education to pupils in disadvantaged circumstances. He returned empty handed: no

such schools could be found.

Nothing could have summed up the outlook at the time better than that once ubiquitous phrase: 'bog-standard comprehensive'.

How different the situation is today. We now have a school system where autonomous schools are able to break free from the intellectual and bureaucratic constraints of the past, allowing school leaders to beat a new path of previously unimaginable success. King Solomon Academy was founded in 2009 in one of the most disadvantaged London wards for child poverty. 44% of the pupils are eligible for free school meals - more than 3 times the national average.

From its inception, King Solomon Academy created an ethos-based on no-excuses school discipline, and unapologetically high academic expectations. Today, it is the best non-selective state secondary school in the country, according to the 5 A* to C measure at GCSE, with 95% of pupils reaching that standard.

King Solomon Academy is now able to spread its means of success to the 34 other schools within its multi-academy trust, Ark Schools. Unsurprisingly, school leaders are clammering at the doors to visit King Solomon Academy.

As a result of a cohort of some of the best teachers we've ever had in the state sector, 1.4 million more pupils are in 'good' and 'outstanding' schools today compared to 2010. We have a generation of Teach First alumni and other teachers who are challenging prevailing education orthodoxies. People like Joe Kirby, Katie Ashford and Rob Peal.

We have a profession that is embracing an evidence based approach to the curriculum and pedagogy - new institutions such as Research Ed, founded by Tom Bennett and the Knowledge Network, a grouping of teachers committed to a knowledge rich curriculum. This government's reforms have been the most radical and far reaching since the [1944 Butler Act](#). That's why, on occasion, they attract controversy. Our reforms are designed to deliver more schools like King Solomon; non-selective schools achieving GCSE results that exceed those of

many selective independent schools.

Of course, there are still too many failing schools with weak leadership in this country. But that number is significantly down since 2010. We have taken nearly 1,400 failing schools out of local-authority control and had their governance transferred to academy trusts. We have invested heavily in the use of phonics in primary schools, and in an innovative scheme to the mastery method of mathematics teaching from Shanghai and Singapore to English schools; 2 measures which, in time, could all but eradicate illiteracy and innumeracy.

Reforms in education cannot be rushed. Changes to the examination and assessment system, which began in 2010, are only just starting, with 20 new GCSEs and 11 new A levels being taught from September and new [national curriculum](#) assessments at primary school being taken this week and next. And there has been a complete end to grade inflation since 2012. Quick fixes for turning the tanker of educational underperformance in this country do not exist. But let me reassure you that things are moving in the right direction.

The state and independent sectors need to work together - using your expertise to sponsor academies and new free schools, helping us to create more state schools that deliver standards we are seeing at Mossbourne Academy, the City Academy Hackney and the London Academy of Excellence - a project in which some here are involved. School leaders visiting these schools will return full of new ideas for improving the curriculum, teaching and organisation at their own institution.

And this is how improvement in any sector occurs: autonomy allows exemplary institutions to emerge, and the innovations which made those institutions exemplary can in turn migrate to drive improvement elsewhere. In time, and given the right channels of communication, the ideas which currently characterise the best of the education sector, will come to characterise the rest of the education sector.

The historical trend towards school autonomy has not been entirely linear. When I first became Schools Minister in 2010, it

was clear that - whilst power had passed from local authorities to schools - the Department for Children, Schools and Families as it was then known, had become addicted to meddling in the minutia of school administration.

Schools had gone through a period of 'initiativeitis', with a constant turnover of 'clever wheezes' emerging from the department, or one of its ever-growing panoply of quangos. national strategies, national curriculum re-writes, a Five-Year Strategy, Every Child Matters - all burdening schools with bureaucracy and complex guidance.

We took clear and purposeful action to free heads from such meddling. We disbanded, merged or cut the government funding of 8 government quangos, an alphabetic soup including Becta; the GTC; the NCSL; the SSAT; and the QCDA.

We also removed 21,000 pages of unnecessary school guidance, reducing the volume by 75%, and centralising all that remained in one place on the GOV.UK website. In place of continual missives to school leaders, the department now sticks to one short monthly email.

Needless legislation which constrained the smooth running of schools has been amended, strengthening teachers' powers to discipline pupils: teachers can now issue [same-day detentions](#); they have stronger [powers to search pupils' possessions](#); and we have clarified teachers' [power to use reasonable force](#).

Today, headteachers no longer have to complete self evaluation forms, submit annual absence and performance targets to local authorities, or instruct their teachers to produce lesson plans or teach in a particular style simply to please Ofsted inspectors.

At the department, we have worked constructively with [Ofsted](#) and Sir Michael Wilshaw to ensure that headteachers are freed to focus on what is best for raising pupil outcomes, and not what is best for pleasing visitors. Ofsted guidance was reduced in 2014 from 411 to 136 pages, and last year guidance was further reduced despite the increased reach of the common inspection framework. The guidance that remains is clear, considered, and

concise.

For headteachers who lead academies, the freedoms are more extensive still. They have more control over their funding, the ability to change term times and the school day, greater freedom over their curriculum, and the freedom to choose where to go to get the best services, such as behaviour support and school improvement.

This is because institutions thrive when the people who lead them are actually in charge. Conversely, there is nothing more deflating than being responsible for an organisation over which you do not have adequate control.

Crucial to a policy of school autonomy is, of course, having enough school leaders with the right skills and experience. For this reason, a significant focus of the [white paper that we published in March is on improving the quality of school leadership within our schools](#).

The National Professional Qualification for headship, known as the NPQ, became optional for heads in the state-funded schools in 2012. We have passed on the delivery of these qualifications to schools and other organisations, in a bid to ensure their content is as focused as possible on real school concerns, and not distracting theories.

We are now taking reforms a step further, redesigning the NPQ to make it a truly world-class badge of excellence. We are convening a group of leading headteachers and education experts to guide and advise on exactly what this qualification should include, and the group will include expertise from across the state and independent sectors.

We will make sure that the new NPQ focuses solely on the practices which are backed up by rigorous evidence and research, not fads.

You may have noticed that when I earlier listed exemplar schools which visitors are keen to visit, they were all in London. Of course, there are excellent schools in all parts of the country, but


we are keenly aware of the existence of cold and hot spots in school improvement. Good leaders are indispensable for turning schools around, but tempting good leaders to schools in areas of historic underperformance is an ongoing challenge.

For this reason, we are launching an Excellence in Leadership Fund, which will offer the development of innovative programmes to train leaders to work in areas where they are needed most.

For ambitious heads who take over failing schools, change cannot occur overnight. Schools run on annual cycles. It has been a disincentive for some leaders taking over underperforming schools, however, that they feel at risk of being judged harshly by Ofsted before they have had time to turn the organisation around.

To prevent this occurring, we are working with Ofsted to introduce 'improvement periods', which give new heads taking on challenging schools sufficient time to make an impact. Where a new head steps in to a school requiring improvement, the school will not face re-inspection until around 30 months after the previous inspection. And where a failing maintained school is replaced by a sponsored academy or a new sponsor is appointed to drive further improvement in an academy, the school will not normally face inspection until its third year of operation.

We have invested in a number of programmes which encourage promising young graduates into the profession, or which train promising teachers to take on leadership positions.

[Teach First](#) , for example, currently has 2,463 graduates of its programme teaching in UK state schools. Of these, 1 in 3 is already a middle or senior leader, and 18 are headteachers.

For bright and ambitious young graduates, a career in teaching now offers rapid advancement opportunities to rival any other profession.

And career advancement for teachers does not end with headship. The challenges of running a multi-academy trust

demand a whole different set of abilities compared to headship, but equally should offer an exciting new avenue for the brightest and best in the profession to continue progressing throughout their careers.

This government will have achieved its aims, if in the years to come, teaching has become established as one of the most exciting and rewarding professions available to young people.

It is a remarkable fact, and perhaps no coincidence, that King Solomon Academy is today making headlines as the best school in the country, but 6 years ago was making headlines for employing the youngest head in the country: Max Haimendorf, who established the school aged just 28 years old, and is still there today.

Another inspiring school leader who I would like to mention is Katharine Birbalsingh. She is currently running a free school in Wembley which shows an admirable disregard for the way in which English schools are normally operated. The school is unapologetically strict and demanding: desks are in rows; corridors are walked in silence; and pupils memorise subject content for weekly tests.

Having visited the school last year, the whole institution emits a sense of positivity and purpose quite unlike any other school I have ever been inside. In this area of significant deprivation, children are brimming with pride at the progress they are making.

Such a school could never have existed before the academies and free school policies. Today, there are over 300 free schools in operation, which will create over 153,000 new school places once at capacity. The best are already extraordinary success stories, forcing all of us to revise our expectations about what children, particularly children from deprived backgrounds, are capable of achieving.

When this government talks about increased school autonomy, I do sense the incredulity with which some school leaders react. They point to a new curriculum; new national assessments at

ages 7 and 11; and reforms to GCSE and A levels.

It is true that since 2010 we have overhauled the testing and assessment system, but that was for good reason. In 2010, 55% of pupils achieved the 'minimum standard' of 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics. However, this number masked a multitude of deficiencies. The design of performance measures encouraged schools to enter its pupils for 'equivalent qualifications' in less academically demanding subjects, which employers told us were worthless. And there was suspicion of grade inflation within the profession and amongst employers.

Having compared the reported improvement in GCSE results to an annual benchmarked aptitude test, Professor Coe of Durham University concluded that the question, I quote, 'is not whether there has been grade inflation, but how much'.

There was also a widespread feeling that qualifications, in particular GCSEs, did not represent the mastery of a sufficiently challenging body of subject knowledge. Did a good GCSE in history represent a basic understanding of the chronology of Britain's past? Did a good GCSE in MFL mean a degree of fluency in the language? Did a good GCSE in English Literature mean a pupil had read widely from the corpus of great works?

The trend towards modular entry for GCSE, and the existence of A and AS levels, meant that pupils were experiencing a continual cycle of examination cramming and practice, limiting opportunity for teachers to revel in the simple pleasure of teaching their subject. Similarly, controlled assessment had become a time-consuming burden on teachers, which limited classroom teaching, and encouraged dubious practices in schools.

So we saw a pressing need to reform the examination system. Many of these reforms which began almost 6 years ago are only just becoming a reality in schools. I believe this process of reform is consistent with a policy of school autonomy. The government's role in education should not be to dictate school practices, but it does need to act as the guardian of high expectations.

General Patton's dictum on leadership was this: 'Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.'

And that represents the philosophy behind our education reforms. Good government does not improve public services. It sets the conditions in which public services can improve themselves. That is what our reforms are achieving in this country's state schools.

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