

Speech

Schools as the engines of social mobility

From: [Department for Education](#) and [Nick Gibb MP](#)
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Schools Minister Nick Gibb sets out the government's reforms to transform life chances through education.



Introduction

Thank you, Sir Peter. Since you established the Sutton Trust almost 20 years ago, no organisation has done more to highlight educational inequality, develop the evidence on how disadvantage can be overcome, and demonstrate the decisive role schools can play in unlocking pupils' potential.

Every event you hold, every study you publish, contributes to a powerful, but simple argument: that for too many children the circumstances of their birth still determine the quality of education they receive and their life chances, but that this need not be inevitable.

Moral purpose

This view has not always attracted widespread support. Over 200 years ago, the Parochial Schools Bill of 1807 proposed a moderate expansion of the availability of basic education by increasing state funding.

It was controversial - there was no agreement that this was a legitimate role for government or a worthwhile use of resources, and the bill failed to pass.

But one MP, Davies Giddy, went further than the others in opposing the very principle of broad access to education. He said: "Giving education to the labouring classes of the poor... would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them."

Thankfully, such offensive views are now so far outside the mainstream - and rare - that they would attract ridicule if repeated today.

A welcome consensus has begun to emerge that schools can - and must - be engines of social mobility.

This commitment to extend opportunity and ensure that every child receives the best possible start in life is at the heart of the government's plan for education.

It's also a moral purpose around which the teaching profession is united. A survey of teachers last year found that the single most popular motivation for joining the profession was a desire to make a difference to pupils' lives - cited by a staggering 93% of those polled.

But a shared moral purpose is not enough - on its own it will not deliver the transformation in the life chances of the most disadvantaged children which we all hope to see.

Attainment gap

Last year, 57.1% of all pupils in state-funded schools achieved 5 A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics. But just 33.1% of pupils entitled to free school meals achieved the same standard.

This underperformance has a clear financial impact. Department for Education analysis has found that pupils who achieve 5 or more good GCSEs (including English and maths) as their highest qualification are estimated to have lifetime productivity gains worth around £100,000 compared to those who fail to reach that level.

But this blighted potential also has a social cost. When we fail to ensure that disadvantaged young people reach their potential, we perpetuate their under-representation in the most senior ranks of our professions and public service and diminish their voice in our democracy.

Two weeks ago, the Sutton Trust published the latest in its long series of analyses looking at the proportion of senior figures educated in state and private schools.

It found that 74% of our most senior judges attended private school, 71% of our top generals attended private school, and 51% of leading print journalists were educated privately. Just 7% of the population as a whole is privately educated.

Progress

The disparity between the educational opportunities open to disadvantaged pupils and their peers has become entrenched and expected over generations. Addressing this unfairness, so that every young person receives the preparation to fulfil their potential, will take many years.

But the urgency with which we have pursued the goal of social mobility since 2010 is already showing promising results.

In 2011, we introduced the pupil premium - a total of around £2.5 billion this year, allocated to schools for each disadvantaged pupil they admit. The pupil premium gives teachers the resources they need to provide additional support to these pupils, and the flexibility to adopt the specific interventions likely to have the greatest impact.

We have funded the Sutton Trust and Impetus-PEF to establish the Education Endowment Foundation to provide teachers with the evidence on which to base their decisions. The EEF has helped to debunk failed teaching methods, including learning styles, and promoted effective approaches, including maths mastery. And the Sutton Trust's report 'What Makes Great Teaching', produced by Professor Robert Coe and colleagues, has been invaluable to teachers.

The department has recognised the overwhelming evidence that the most effective approach to teaching early reading is systematic synthetic phonics. In 2012, we therefore introduced the phonics screening check to help schools identify pupils struggling to master the basics of reading so that any difficulties can be quickly addressed.

Since the check was introduced, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard has increased from 58% in 2012 to 77% last year - equivalent to more than 120,000 pupils reading more effectively. That's 120,000 more pupils better prepared to develop a love of reading, and more likely to enter secondary school ready to succeed.

And our 'gap index measure' shows that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has already narrowed by 7.1% at key stage 2 and 6.6% at key stage 4 since 2011.

Our reforms to the primary curriculum are challenging and demanding, but the rewards colossal.

They include our focus on phonics. As increasing numbers of schools adopt high-quality systematic synthetic phonics in the early teaching of reading, imagine the effect of ensuring every child leaves primary school as a fluent reader.

And our new primary maths curriculum and plans for a multiplication tables check in year 6. Imagine if every child left primary school knowing their tables by heart.

And the new grammar requirements, ensuring that every primary school is teaching English grammar - the first time for a generation.

We have much further to go in building an education system which is truly the engine of social mobility it needs to be. But no government has done more, or made greater progress, than we have since 2010.

More good places

The most fundamental feature of an education system which promotes social mobility is one in which every child is able to attend a good school.

Today, over 1.4 million more children attend schools judged by Ofsted to be 'good' or 'outstanding' than in 2010, thanks to the hard work of teachers and the reforms introduced by government.

The success of schools in London shows the way forward. In the capital, 60.9% of pupils achieve 5 A* to C at GCSE, including English and Maths; across England, the figure is 57.1%. Most strikingly, the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals in some local authorities in London, including Tower Hamlets, exceeds the average performance of all pupils across England.

But though schools in England have secured significant improvements, and some areas are achieving remarkable progress, we need to do more to ensure that every child attends a school which gives them the best possible start in life.

The Secretary of State has characterised this challenge as the need to secure educational excellence everywhere - so that a pupil, in whatever circumstances, wherever they live, and in any school, receives the highest possible standard of education.

Last year, I challenged the leaders of one local authority in the North West to address the entrenched underperformance in their secondary schools.

Last year, 37.4% of pupils in Knowsley achieved 5 A* to C at GCSE, including English and Maths. This was 19.7 percentage points lower than the national average. The figure was even lower for pupils eligible for free school meals - at 20.5% - 12.6 percentage points lower than the national average.

In response, the leader of the council wrote a public letter to me. He described my intervention as “distasteful and opportunistic”, and suggested that I should be reassured by the increase in their LA’s GCSE results last year: from 35.4% achieving 5 A* to C, including English and Maths, to 37.4% - still 19.7 percentage points below the national average.

This council leader’s excuses for the underperformance of schools in his area represent an unacceptable complacency which prioritises maintaining a comfortable status quo for adults over protecting the life chances of children.

The Education and Adoption Bill, shortly to receive royal assent, will give the department new powers to address failing and coasting schools.

Failing schools, those judged by Ofsted to be inadequate, will automatically become academies, so that they can benefit from the expertise and support of a strong sponsor.

Schools identified as coasting will be assessed by the relevant regional schools commissioner. Those with a credible plan to improve will be helped to do so; those with greater challenges will be eligible for intervention so that they become a sponsored academy.

And the free schools programme, including studio schools and university technical colleges - which has created 380 new schools and 190,000 new places since it was established in 2010 - will continue to bring fresh ideas and new approaches into areas in need of additional high-quality places.

We will deliver our manifesto commitment to open at least 500 of these new schools over this Parliament, so that more communities can benefit from the excellent standard of education now offered by free schools, such as Michaela Community School in Brent or Dixons Trinity Academy in Bradford.

A rich curriculum

These structural changes - through additional powers for RSCs and new free schools opening in response to demand - will contribute to higher standards for all pupils, and especially the most disadvantaged.

Just as important, though, is ensuring that schools have the freedom and resources to offer a curriculum which stretches all pupils and equips them for further study and employment.

For children from relatively advantaged backgrounds, the curriculum they follow at school has always been less material - their parents will ensure they have the background knowledge and cultural literacy to read widely and pursue their interests.

Disadvantaged children, though, perhaps without the benefit of educated parents at home, are more likely to rely upon their school curriculum to provide the intellectual foundation they need to grow into confident, articulate young adults able to advance to an apprenticeship, university or a rewarding career.

As literary critic and education expert ED Hirsch has powerfully argued, and cognitive psychologists such as Daniel Willingham have proved, a vague 'skills-based' curriculum, light on knowledge but heavy on fads and wishful thinking, provides scant hope to disadvantaged children hoping to build a brighter future.

The new national curriculum, introduced in September 2014, has carefully sequenced knowledge at its heart. And the new GCSEs and A levels, the first of which began to be taught in September

2015, set higher expectations and reflect the advice of leading subject experts.

Ensuring that individual subject curriculums are appropriately designed would, in isolation, be insufficient. There is clear evidence that disadvantaged young people have also been less likely to take the subjects most valuable to further progression.

Some schools simply did not expect disadvantaged pupils - even when highly able - to study the most academic subjects. Without these subjects, university and many careers fall further out of reach.

Last year, the Sutton Trust published analysis which looked at the GCSE performance of pupils who had previously scored in the top 10% nationally at the end of primary school. They found that, even within this group, pupils who had received free school meals were significantly less likely to be taking history, geography, a language, or triple science at GCSE than their peers.

In the last Parliament, we announced that we would introduce the Progress 8 accountability measure to replace the existing 5 A* to C GCSE metric. From this year, schools will be held to account for the progress their pupils make, rather than simply their final attainment. They will be incentivised to stretch their most able pupils and support their weakest, rather than focusing on a narrow C/D grade threshold.

And last year we set out proposals to implement our manifesto commitment for 90% of pupils to study the English Baccalaureate. For many schools, this will be a significant change as they reconfigure their curriculums and establish new expectations.

Government must also do its part to support the change, especially by helping to recruit the additional teachers needed in subjects such as modern foreign languages.

But the prize is worth it - virtually all young people studying subjects which keep options open, so that they can choose their

future path on the basis of hope and aspiration rather than elimination of options already closed to them.

The best teachers in the right schools

The report you are publishing today provides more detail on the final, crucial element of an education system with social justice at its heart - ensuring that we have the best teachers working in the schools which need them most.

As you all know, teacher recruitment in England has become more challenging as the economy continues to strengthen and pupil numbers rise.

The data show that we have more teachers working in our schools than ever before, that the overall vacancy rate in schools has remained broadly stable over the past 15 years, but that recruitment is tightening in specific subjects and regions.

Your survey also suggests that schools in the most challenging circumstances may be finding it more difficult to recruit experienced teachers.

We have heard schools' concerns, and are doing everything possible to support the recruitment and retention of teachers. There is no single solution, but I believe that the department does have a strong plan.

We are reforming initial teacher training, giving schools greater flexibility to train their own teachers. We have increased bursaries, launched a television advertising campaign, and are investing up to £67 million to recruit additional teachers in maths and physics.

We are also taking action to tackle excessive teacher workload. The OECD's TALIS survey from 2013 showed that teachers in England work 8 hours longer than the OECD average each week, but their time in front of a class is in line with the average.

We are working with the teaching unions and others from the

profession to identify unnecessary tasks, so that teachers can focus on what they do best. Three working groups - on marking, planning and management data - will shortly report their findings.

We are also introducing a new National Teaching Service, which will recruit excellent teachers and place them in challenging schools - the teacher will gain valuable new experience, and the school will benefit from their expertise and the confidence that they will perform to a high standard. Underperforming schools in areas that struggle to recruit the best teachers will be key beneficiaries of the NTS, fulfilling our commitment to delivering educational excellence everywhere.

But, alongside this work, I believe all of us have a responsibility to highlight the opportunities now open to teachers, to build rewarding careers and make a lasting difference to the lives of young people.

Conclusion

I hope that we will be setting out further details on these priorities in due course, and will have more to say about the next steps in placing social mobility at the heart of our education system.

Taken together, I am confident that our approach amounts to an ambitious plan which follows the evidence, builds on our shared moral purpose, and will transform the life chances of our most disadvantaged young people.

Thank you.

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