


Speech

Sir Michael Wilshaw's speech to the Fair Education Alliance

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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke to the Fair Education Alliance in London about addressing educational inequality.



Good evening everyone. I am really pleased to have been asked to take part in this event to mark the launch of your latest [annual report card](#). 

As I approach the end of my tenure as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, I am saddened, but not surprised, by many of your findings. My motivation and commitment to the cause of educational equality and social mobility remains as strong today as it did on the day I first entered a classroom in Bermondsey nearly half a century ago. And let me tell you about that first class, because it has a bearing on what I'm going to say tonight.

Since Tracey disappeared into the mists of East London to do an unskilled job, somewhere on the Bermondsey dockside, the world has changed. The world economy has changed, and expectations have changed. Quite rightly we have much higher expectations of what our children can achieve to prepare them for this vastly different economic landscape.

If Tracey were growing up in today's world she would have more choices and better options. Children from all walks of life should now be able to achieve any goal. Expectations are higher, our schools are better – in part thanks to Ofsted – and there is definitely more opportunity for all.

The fact that many more of our children from across the social spectrum are doing well is a cause for optimism.

So why am I standing here making this speech? Because, although we are doing better, we are not doing anywhere near well enough to compete with the best jurisdictions in the world. And we are certainly not doing well enough for our poorest children. What is particularly worrying is that we are not doing well enough for our brightest children coming from poor backgrounds.

There's that damning statistic, the one that keeps me awake at night, from the Sutton Trust. Seven thousand of our brightest children, mainly from poorer backgrounds, were in the top 10% nationally at age 11 but were not in the top 25% at GCSE 5 years later.

I therefore applaud the collective efforts of the people in this room who have come together under the umbrella of the Fair Education Alliance to try to do something about educational inequality.

And let's be clear. This isn't simply about doing right by a certain sector of society. Tackling inequality benefits the whole of our education system. When we improve standards for the most disadvantaged then standards improve nationally. As Lord Adonis, the pioneer of the original academies programme, understood, if you tackle problems at the bottom end there will

be a trickle-up effect through the whole sector.

One of my first acts as Chief Inspector was to assemble an expert panel of head teachers, academics and educational leaders to undertake an in-depth study into the educational achievements of England's poorest children. This was a follow-up to the landmark reports published by 2 of my predecessors in 1993 and in 2003.

My report on access and achievement, entitled [Unseen Children](#), concluded that poverty of expectation had become a greater problem than material poverty. The children of poor parents with high expectations were doing much better academically than those whose parents and teachers expected little of them.

The report also found that the distribution of underachievement had shifted. Twenty or 30 years ago, the problems were in urban areas, especially inner London schools. At that time these were the worst-achieving in the country.

By 2013, schools in inner as well as outer London had become the highest performing in England. Instead, we found that many of the poor children being let down by the system in recent times attended schools either in generally affluent areas with small numbers of free school meal children or in places that were relatively isolated, such as rural communities and coastal towns.

I made a series of recommendations for politicians and policy-makers on the back of these findings.

Among the most important of these were:

- the development of a number of sub-regional challenges aimed particularly at raising the achievement of disadvantaged children
- a more strategic approach to the appointment of National Leaders of Education and their matching with schools in need of support
- the creation of a 'National Service of Teachers' to direct ambitious and talented professionals to underperforming schools in less fashionable or more challenging parts of the

country

- the reshaping of vocational education

The report also recognised the fundamental importance of early years in shaping the future prospects of young people.

Of course there is no magic bullet or shortcut to success. The Fair Education Alliance (FEA) itself sets out an ambitious array of recommendations for how we can make things better. Tonight I would like to concentrate on progress we have seen and the challenges that still lie ahead.

We need to get the early years right

I have said many times before that underachievement starts from birth. Too many children are given a poor start in the essential early years. I whole-heartedly support the recommendations of your report for more use of qualified teachers in this sector.

Children who fall behind in the early years of their life struggle to make up for it in later years. If by age 7, a child cannot read, the odds are stacked against them. If children cannot count, sit still, follow instructions or hold a pencil properly when they leave Reception, they will always be playing catch-up.

This is why I have long argued that effective nursery and primary schools are the best places for very young children from disadvantaged homes. In these schools, clear routines bring order and security into the lives of young children and help build self-assurance as well as awareness of the needs of others.

In our last [Annual Report for the Early Years](#), I suggested that there was a strong case for schools taking many more of the poorest children from the age of 2. Schools have the in-built advantage of being able to offer continuity across the transition to Reception, have more access to specialist support, employ well-qualified graduate teachers and are familiar with tracking children's development.

I also called for much more to be done to encourage parents of

the poorest 2-year-old children to take up the offer of a funded place in a high-quality provider. We found that nearly half of all 2-year-olds (around 113,000) eligible for 15 hours of free early education had not taken up their place in any type of setting. It is essential that more is done, through children's centres and health visitors, to promote greater take-up.

We need to get the best leaders and the best teachers to the schools that need them most

It is vital that we do far more to attract and incentivise the best people to lead underperforming schools in challenging areas. All my experience has taught me that when schools are chaotic it is the poor and vulnerable who suffer most. The lack of structure at home is replicated at school and, unlike their peers from middle class backgrounds, poor parents often lack the capacity to compensate for deficiencies in the school and in the classroom. Therefore getting good leadership into these areas is of fundamental importance.

The [government's recently published White Paper](#) talks about "rebalancing incentives" and "investing in targeted initiatives" to boost leadership capacity in challenging areas and to create career pathways for people who want to work in the areas where they are most needed.

This is certainly something I welcome, along with the emerging National Teachers Service, particularly given they were a key feature of my report, and I look forward to hearing more detail about these measures and, more important, seeing them bearing fruit.

The FEA proposals for incentivising teachers to different areas, with schemes such as mortgage-deposit support, are exactly the sort of innovative thinking that we should be exploring to help with this challenge. We need to get vocational and post 16 education right.

The [Unseen Children report](#) expressed my concerns about the overall quality of provision for the many children who would

prefer an alternative to university. Our system is adept at guiding students into higher education. However, as the House of Lords social mobility committee found last week, it still struggles, despite the recent focus on apprenticeships, to inform them about alternative career pathways available to them.

We simply have to improve the quality of our technical provision and present it as a valid educational path if we are to equip youngsters – especially those from poorer backgrounds – with the skills they need and employers want.

We are making strides in the right direction here, with ambitious targets for the creation and quality of apprenticeships and a growing number of university technical colleges coming into the system.

As the Alliance report card recognises, we need to ensure that careers advice in schools improves so that young people understand the different options in front of them and can make informed choices about their future.

We need more political leadership and regional solutions

We need more focus on those areas that are not delivering the necessary high standards for their children. I welcome the government's White Paper proposals for focusing efforts in 'Achieving Excellence Areas'. This version of my suggestion of 'sub-regional challenges' will only succeed if local politicians, be they mayors, council leaders or cabinet members, are prepared to take ownership of school performance no matter what the governance structure and status of the school.

We need them to be visible, high-profile figures that people can recognise as education champions. The great success stories in London would not have happened without the drive and commitment of the likes of Jules Pipe and Sir Robin Wales in Hackney and in Newham, respectively.

There is ultimately, however, only so much that the school can

achieve without the commitment of parents and carers.

We need to ensure schools do more to engage with those parents who don't care enough about their children's education.

As the chief executive of Centre Forum observed last week, many white British pupils are falling behind students from other ethnic backgrounds by the time they take their GCSEs because of a lack of support from their parents.

The family is the great educator. We need more leaders who have no qualms about reminding parents of their obligation to be a good parent – coming to open evenings, making sure their child does their homework, reading to them and listening to them read.

I know this is a difficult task but it is not impossible.

As I recounted in a radio interview just this morning, it can be tough to get these parents on board. I often speculate on how useful it would be for heads to have the ability to fine those who have the capacity but wilfully choose not to engage.

Grounds for optimism

Let's not allow ourselves to be too pessimistic.

I do not underestimate how difficult it is to educate children who are poor and who lack all the advantages that a more affluent background confers. I understand that it's a lot easier to teach children who don't come to school hungry, who live in homes filled with books, who have parents that are employed, let alone university educated.

I spent most of my professional career trying to enthuse children whom others had written off. It isn't easy for schools to compensate for social disadvantage. But never make the mistake that because it's difficult, schools cannot make a difference. They can.

We know that we can overcome the challenges of poverty because we have seen it happen. In London, with effective, tenacious leadership and political will, failure turned into stunning success over a relatively short period of time. There is no reason, in my view, that this sort of success cannot be replicated elsewhere.

This FEA report has focused on the progress that is being made in the North East of England. We also know there are schools in places like Portsmouth and Barking and Dagenham that are now bucking the trend in terms of the achievement of poorer children, especially from white British backgrounds.

Conclusion

It is not only a moral imperative that we should do better for our poorest youngsters, but also crucial if we are going to become a more productive nation and a more socially-cohesive one.

If we are to compete with the best jurisdictions in the world then we need more organisations, politicians and leaders to collaborate and support schools, and ensure that every young person gets the standard of education they deserve.

It's only through commitment, ambition and determination that we will break the pattern of underachievement in challenging areas of the country and create a more fair and equal society. A society where every child has the same life chances regardless of where they live.

I commend all of you in this room for your commitment to those goals.

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