

Speech

Sir Michael Wilshaw's speech to ASCL conference

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke to the Association of School and College Leaders in Birmingham.



Thank you for that introduction, Stephen, and thanks for inviting me to speak at your annual conference once again.

Can I first of all apologise for pulling out of last year's conference at short notice. But I'm afraid an emergency heart operation got in the way. Nevertheless, all these things have an upside because it reassured the doubters that I really do have a heart. Indeed, I have a very big heart for our education service and particularly for the great work that you do as headteachers. That's not just an idle platitude at the start of a speech, but a deeply felt belief in the power of headship to change young people's lives for the better. Standards have improved in our country over the last 20 years principally because of you.

A tough job made tougher

Yours is a tough job. But there is no better one. And the best heads, despite the difficulties and the anxieties, know this to be true. In my view, every head has to be Janus-like. What I mean by this is that part of you is always looking one way – at what's happening in the classroom and in the corridors to ensure that young people are being taught well. But another part of you is always worrying about the 2 looming vacancies in the maths department and the possibility of losing the best head of science you've ever had to the school down the road whose budget allows a higher salary to be paid.

This constant head-turning always gave me a painful crick in the neck, but at the moment you probably need a double dose of Ralgex applied liberally when resignation deadlines come round.

Recruitment is a burning issue and all of us, including the Department for Education, have got to face it head on and develop strategies not only to solve the present problems but also to ensure that we don't face these staffing issues again and again and again.

I feel passionately about this because for a dozen or so years as a head I was compelled to travel to Galway, Cork and Dublin to attract Ireland's finest to teach in east London and if that didn't work, raid the school budget to fly to New Zealand or Australia. But I suspect budgets now won't allow that extravagance.

The problems around recruitment, as I said to the select committee earlier this week, are threatening to undermine the progress that all of us have made. But it will also make it harder to meet the challenges of more demanding assessment, higher floor targets and a changing curriculum. I know you will meet these challenges in the same way that previous generations of headteachers have met earlier challenges. But you need help. The reasons for the teacher shortages are already well documented so I don't need to dwell on them too much today, other than to say that the exponential growth in international

schools abroad, many of which are sponsored by our top public schools, is pouring petrol onto the fire.

As I pointed out last week, [there are now an estimated 8,000 international schools, many of them employing our teachers](#). And that figure is forecast to nearly double over the next few years. What joy! How wonderful for the independent sector, how miserable for the rest of us.

I have to confess that as a head, it was always my ambition to make my school so good that parents would rather opt for a free state education than an independent one. Therefore it's good to see that the Good Schools Guide is recognising that our schools are getting so much better. Our job must be to convince parents, particularly those of more able children, that state secondary schools can deliver the very best education and help youngsters achieve their full potential.

It is precisely for this reason that I have asked HMI to focus on the progress of the most able pupils more than ever before during school inspections. They will be particularly tough on schools where children are coming into Year 7, having done well at primary but then tread water rather than swim upstream.

I want to see, and you want to see, more youngsters from the state system going to the top universities year on year. I particularly want to see poor youngsters getting to the Russell Group in greater numbers than they are doing at the moment. If that is to happen, then the gap in progress and attainment at secondary level between free school meal children and their peers has got to start closing. It really is an indictment of our secondary system that this 28 percentage point gap has not closed in nearly 10 years. This really can't go on. It is morally indefensible and a waste of so much pupil premium money.

However, let's be clear, these recruitment problems are not just being fuelled by a rapacious independent sector and an improving economy, but also by public perceptions of our profession.

One way you can certainly help is by refusing any request for

your school to feature on a 'fly on the wall' television show. The problem with these programmes is that they provide great TV but little reality. They inevitably focus on the sensational, at the cost of presenting a balanced picture of what goes on in our schools. The spotlight always falls on the 'lippy' kid and the NQT in trouble and gives a distorted view of our state system. All they do is reinforce the caricatures of comprehensive schools promoted by those who don't understand them, would like to get rid of them and return to selection.

However, no matter how much effort we put into raising the status of the profession, I fear we will never properly get on top of the teacher supply issue unless, and until, the National College for Teaching and Leadership starts to get ahead of the curve. Put bluntly, the National College of Leadership has to show leadership. It has to say more about leadership. And it certainly has to deliver more teachers to your front door. At the moment, it is letting down our system, our schools and our children, particularly in the poorest areas.

As I argued in my [Annual Report](#), shortages are being exacerbated because the current teacher-training regime is too disorganised, too unevenly distributed and too driven by market forces. The freedom that good and outstanding schools now have to take more control of teacher training – while a positive development – risks further widening the inequalities in our system because there are few strategies in place to prevent this happening.

You will know that I have previously voiced concern about an emerging two-tier education system. More and more, we see the best schools in the most popular areas snapping up the best teachers while underperforming schools in poorer or more isolated areas are facing an increasingly desperate struggle to find good candidates. They are trapped in a vicious cycle – unable to recruit because they are struggling, but unable to improve because they cannot recruit.

Headship remains a great job

Having said all this, you know and I know that most headteachers will do their very best to cope with these problems.

And let's not forget, the opportunities and rewards out there for the problem-solving, creative and ambitious head are greater now than ever before. Secondary headship is well remunerated and executive headship even more so. And rightly so. It's one of the most important jobs in any community and vital to our country.

Today's good and ambitious head can not only shape the lives of young people but also shape our national system through system leadership.

The good and ambitious head can now find themselves running a multi-academy trust or becoming a Regional Schools Commissioner or, my goodness, even ending up as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector.

The critical importance of headship is a theme I have returned to time and again during my time at the Ofsted helm. Our inspection evidence consistently shows that having the right calibre of leader in charge is key to a school's success.

Leadership succession

That is why perhaps the single most important duty of any headteacher is to plan effectively for their own succession. In a much more autonomous system, with so much depending on appointing people who know how to use their freedoms, it is vital that we do more to nurture leadership.

I have long worried that bringing through the next generation of leaders has not been given the priority that it deserves. The same attention that has been given to structural reform in the last few years now needs to be given to ensuring that our country not only has enough high-quality teachers but enough great leaders, particularly in those regions that are languishing in mediocrity.

It is for this reason that I commissioned HMI to carry out some fieldwork to gain a better understanding of the systems in place across the country to identify and prepare the next generation of great secondary headteachers. The findings will inform my next monthly commentary. It should have some important things to say.

Weaknesses remain in secondary sector

As a nation, we need to be assured that there are enough great leaders to sustain high standards and to tackle the deep problems that have still to be overcome in our state school system.

For make no mistake, while the system has got better, improvement is only partial.

Inspection evidence over the last academic year demonstrates that England's primary schools continue to forge ahead. However, as you well know, secondary school performance remains a problem in large swathes of our country.

As a result, there should be some anxiety that when the next PISA tables are published later this year, our rankings won't show much improvement.

Those who read my last Annual Report or my recent [IPPR speech on the northern powerhouse and the low outcomes for pupils in Manchester and Liverpool](#), will know how concerned I am that educational success isn't spread evenly across the country. What improvement we have seen in secondary schools has been disproportionately driven by schools in some parts of England, particularly London, and not others.

There is an 11 percentage point gap between the proportion of secondary schools that are good or better in the South and East and in the North and Midlands. This is something we cannot ignore, especially as primary schools are doing just as well in these regions as they are in the South.

Local politicians in underperforming parts of the country must be as determined to drive their schools to do better, irrespective of their status, as they are to lobby for fast trains or new motorways. Children in their regions deserve as good an education as children in the South. Without a decent education, many will remain trapped in a cycle of deprivation that no amount of extra roads and railways will ever help them to escape.

Children in Salford, Knowsley and Bradford need to have the same opportunities as those in London, Oxfordshire and Surrey.

However, it remains the case that some of the weaknesses in secondary schools I have highlighted over the past 12 months are more generic and need attention right across the country.

As I've already implied with my earlier comments about independent schools, we still have far too many secondaries not building on progress made at primary school, especially when it comes to meeting the needs of the most able.

The survey that Ofsted brought out last autumn, entitled [The wasted years?](#), found that in too many secondary schools, Key Stage 3 is not given the priority it deserves. Its status as the poor relation to other key stages is exemplified in the way many schools monitor and assess pupils' progress and in the way they allocate resources and timetable teachers. Too often, inspectors found that the best and most experienced teachers were heavily weighted towards Key Stages 4 and 5.

The quality of teaching and the rate of pupils' progress in Years 7 to 9 are too often failing to prepare youngsters for the next stage of their education. Modern foreign languages, history and geography, in particular, are being taught in a way that is failing to engage or enthuse pupils in many of our schools at this key stage.

This is a serious concern given the government's clear ambition for the great majority of pupils who started secondary school last September to enter the EBacc subjects in 5 years' time.

You will also know that I have real concerns about the overall quality of provision for the many children who do not succeed at 16 or who would prefer an alternative to university. Our system is adept at guiding students into higher education. But it still struggles, despite the recent focus on apprenticeships, to inform them about alternative career pathways available to them.

Preparation for employment remains poor and careers guidance in both schools and colleges is uniformly weak. We simply have to improve the quality of our technical and vocational provision and present it as a valid educational route if we are to equip youngsters with the skills they need and that employers want.

So my major question to you today is the one I have posed in the past and will continue to ask in my remaining few months in this job.

If some schools can get these things right, then why can't more do so?

The task of any secondary headteacher and any leader of a federation or multi-academy trust must be to properly address these systemic weaknesses in their institution or their constituent schools.

So that when an inspector walks in and rattles off the important questions:

- What are you doing to strengthen the Key Stage 3 curriculum?
- What are you doing to make sure your most able pupils are being stretched?
- What steps are you taking to improve outcomes for your youngsters on free school meals?
- How do you ensure that your Year 11 students fully understand the range of career and study options available to them?

You should be able to answer by demonstrating progress in each of these areas.

Challenging the system to do better

Since being appointed Chief Inspector, you know that I have had to sometimes deliver difficult messages.

I am very well aware that I have often been challenging and outspoken on a number of issues. And I know I have been particularly tough on secondary schools in the last couple of years. But I hope you understand my reasons for being so.

I am desperate to see standards rising in all our schools and for every child to have the chance of a decent education that will set them up for life in an increasingly uncertain and competitive world.

I know my decision to scrap the satisfactory grade and replace it with requires improvement, for instance, caused a fair degree of ferment at the time. But you know as well as I do that we couldn't carry on with a situation where 2 million children were being consigned to a mediocre education year after year, inspection after inspection.

The fact that we now have nearly 1.4 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010 convinces me that it was the right thing to do and should give us all cause for optimism.

And despite all the challenges and the problems that I've alluded to, I do remain an optimist. One of the undoubted upsides of this job is being able to tour the country, taking in places like Stoke-on-Trent where I was last week, and seeing dedicated and talented leaders producing results in the most difficult circumstances. It reinforces my sense of optimism and my belief in the power of headship in particular.

As I have remarked before, one of the most gratifying things I do is to write to those headteachers who are leading schools that require improvement but where inspectors have judged that the leadership is tackling the weaknesses and turning things around. That is such an exciting experience for all involved, including inspectors.

I am also committed to recognising the achievements of those people who are showing true system leadership. I recently took pleasure in [writing letters to the first of the heads nominated by HMI as 'exceptional leaders'](#). Heads who have turned their ambitions for success into reality. Heads who have managed to raise standards for children not only in their own schools, but at other schools nearby. I look forward to writing many more such letters in the months ahead.

Formally recognising exceptional leadership is just a small demonstration of my determination to support good and ambitious headteachers. Indeed, Ofsted will always support those who are doing their best, particularly in challenging circumstances. Those who attack the inspectorate, as they have done regularly over the last 20-odd years, should recognise that. They should also remember how dismal things were before greater accountability was introduced in the early 1990s.

Ofsted remains an important and influential lever for improving standards.

Inspection, however, will never be an exact science – and nor, in my view, should it be. Our judgements are always going to be a balance between historical data, observation on the day, and our professional assessment of the leadership being exercised at every level.

It would be foolish to argue that any system based partly on human subjectivity is infallible. However, in the last few years we have done more than at any previous time to eradicate inconsistencies and make inspections as robust as possible. Ofsted occasionally gets it wrong but when we do, we intervene much more quickly and take steps to put it right.

However, I appreciate we need to do even more to instil even greater confidence in the reliability and consistency of inspection.

That is why I have introduced more independent scrutiny of our complaint investigation arrangements to ensure that they are seen as transparent, fair and objective. Since September, we

have had external representatives sitting alongside Senior HMI on our new complaints-scrutiny panels. To date, these panels have considered more than 20 such cases and the feedback has been positive.

Quality assurance is central to our work and we will continue to modify and refine our QA systems as we move forward.

Promised reforms have been delivered

When I addressed this conference 2 years ago, I promised that Ofsted would move towards a more proportionate and risk-based inspection regime, alleviating the pressure and burden on the majority of schools that were now good.

I made a commitment to bring inspection in-house as soon as our outsourced contracts reached their expiry date. I also made a commitment that our inspection teams in future would not only include many more serving heads from good and outstanding schools but would also be led by Her Majesty's Inspectors.

I am pleased to be here in front of you today knowing that I have honoured each of these pledges.

As you know, since September, Ofsted has been inspecting schools judged good at their last inspection in a radically different way. Our [new model of HMI-led short inspections](#) starts from the premise that the school remains good. The focus of inspection is very much on whether the culture of the school is supporting good teaching and learning and whether the leadership has a real handle on the strengths and weaknesses of the school. And, most importantly, that the leadership has a clear plan to put things right.

Inspectors take a pragmatic view of any isolated pockets of weakness as long as the school is heading in the right direction and leaders have identified what needs to be done.

This is designed to encourage honest dialogue between the HMI and senior leaders. We want you to be equally open about what

is working well and about what needs to improve. In other words, don't obfuscate or try to cover up weaknesses that will almost inevitably become apparent during the course of the inspection.

So far this academic year, nearly 7 out of 10 good schools we have re-inspected have either stayed good or improved to outstanding. In the schools that remained good, HMI encountered a positive culture where pupils were keen to learn. The leadership of teaching, learning and assessment was secure across the school. Governors had a sound grasp of both the school's strengths and the areas needing improvement. They did not stray into operational matters.

Inspectors were satisfied that the weaknesses identified by leaders and corroborated by inspection evidence were not having a detrimental impact on overall standards. These schools, to all intents and purposes, remained good schools.

In the minority of schools that went down a grade or more, inspectors, by contrast, often found an overly generous self-assessment of the school by governors and senior leaders that was not supported by evidence. Leaders were slow to take action to address weaknesses and there was too much variation in the quality of middle leadership. In these schools, the messages of the head and senior leaders were not getting through to middle leaders and frontline teachers. As a result, disconnection led to variability across the schools in terms of teaching and behaviour.

It is still early days, but the feedback we have had so far on these new, more flexible arrangements has been encouraging. I would be really interested in hearing the views of anyone here who has had first-hand experience of a short inspection.

Meanwhile, my colleague Sean Harford and others have been working hard to dispel many of the [common staffroom myths that build up over time about what Ofsted requires](#) when it comes to things like lesson-planning, observation and marking.

The message is taking time to get through, especially to classroom teachers. So I will make it plain once again: Ofsted

wants schools to simply focus on doing the basic things well and acting in the interests of their pupils and their parents.

We do not have a prescriptive idea of what the teaching should look like, how books should be marked, feedback provided or progress assessed. We are only interested in whether it works.

As I have already outlined, we have taken some important steps to reduce the unnecessary pressure and burden of inspection.

You must do so as well by not using Ofsted as a management tool to do what should be done as a matter of routine. A good head should always say to staff, "I want you to do this for the benefit of the children, not for the benefit of Ofsted." A weak head uses the fear of Ofsted as an unnecessary crutch to compensate for poor leadership.

So please don't spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for inspection, which for most schools will now only come around every 3 years and will last for just a day. Please don't expend precious time and resources on game-playing and 'Mocksteds'. And please try to refrain from providing a living to those consultancy charlatans still claiming to know what Ofsted is looking for.

Conclusion

I would like to end my speech as I began it – by acknowledging the real challenges you are facing as school leaders. I know that Ofsted will never be popular but I do hope you can see why we have been so vital to the education system in this country and why our children have benefited from greater accountability.

In a few months' time I will be handing over the reins to my successor. From whichever side of the Atlantic they may hail, I'm sure you will make them feel as welcome as you have always made me feel.

In ASCL conferences to come, I hope very much the next Chief Inspector will be able to congratulate you for delivering sustained

improvement in secondary school standards, for bridging the regional divide and for sending many more children from the comprehensive system to our top universities.

My abiding belief in the power of great leadership means I am confident that all this can be achieved. I wish you every success.

Thank you for listening.

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