

## Speech

# Sir Michael Wilshaw speech at IPPR

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)  
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke to the Institute for Public Policy Research about education in Manchester and Liverpool.



I'm making this speech in London, but I would have preferred to make it in Manchester. Unfortunately, logistical difficulties made that impossible. But the irony of pronouncing on education in the North from the smug South isn't lost on me.

My last [Annual Report in December](#) painted a stark picture of a nation divided at the age of 11. Too many children in the North and Midlands, I reported, are being taught in schools that are not good enough. Nearly 1 in 3 secondaries there requires improvement or is inadequate compared to 1 in 4 elsewhere. Of the 16 local authorities nationally with the poorest performing secondary schools, 13 were above a line from the Bristol Channel to the Wash.

Read the news story: [Chief Inspector calls for education to be central to Manchester and Liverpool's strategies for growth.](#)

It is fair to say that not all parts of the North and Midlands perform poorly. Many are good and a few are exceptional. It's also the case that there are areas in the South that are educational laggards. But overall there is a significant discrepancy in performance between North and South. According to the Sunday Times schools guide only a third of the best state schools are in the North and Midlands.

Manchester and Liverpool illustrate the scale of the problem. Three in 10 secondary schools in Manchester and four in 10 in Liverpool require improvement or are inadequate compared to 1 in 10 in inner London. The situation in some of their satellite towns is even worse. A third of the schools in Rochdale are not good enough, as is a similar proportion in Salford. In Oldham, 6 in 10 secondaries require improvement or are inadequate and in Knowsley not a single secondary school is good or better.

Fewer than half of all children in these 6 local authorities achieved 5 good GCSEs last year, compared to a national average of 57%.

Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds fared particularly badly. In inner London, almost half of pupils eligible for free school meals were awarded five good GCSEs last year. In Greater Manchester, just under a third were successful. In Liverpool it was around a quarter and in Knowsley, only 1 in 5 pupils eligible for free school meals achieved 5 good GCSEs.

Manchester and Liverpool are at the core of our ambitions for a northern powerhouse. They are the engines that could transform the prospects of the entire region. But as far as secondary education is concerned, they are not firing on all cylinders. In fact they seem to be going into reverse. The proportion of Manchester's pupils gaining good GCSEs declined from 51.4% 2

years ago to 47.5% now. In Liverpool, the percentage fell from 49.9 to 48.6% over the same period.

## **Is poverty the culprit?**

Since I spelt out Ofsted's concerns late last year, several commentators have argued that disadvantage explains the difference. The North is relatively poor and the South rich.

But if poverty is the culprit, why are primary schools in the North and Midlands doing so well? There is little difference in inspection outcomes for primaries in these areas and those in the rest of the country. How can deprivation explain disappointment at secondary school yet fail to impede progress at primary? Poverty doesn't wait to kick in at 11.

I do not underestimate how difficult it is to educate children who are poor and who lack all the advantages a middle-class background confers. I have 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.

## **Does ethnicity explain London's success?**

Others claim that it isn't poverty but ethnicity that accounts for the discrepancy. London has outperformed the rest, so the argument goes, because children of immigrants tend to be more ambitious. London benefits disproportionately because 37% of its citizens were born overseas. Whereas the rest of the country has higher proportions of the lowest performing ethnic group, white Britons on free school meals.

Yet parts of inner-city Liverpool and Manchester are no strangers to immigration. Some 25% of residents in Manchester were foreign-born. While Leicester, which has a minority white British population, is one of the worst performing local authority areas. Only half of its pupils achieved 5 good GCSEs.

Conversely Newcastle, where 85% of secondary schools are good or better and where on average 57.3% students achieved 5 good GCSEs, has far fewer immigrants – only 6% of its citizens were born overseas. Clearly, school progress or decline cannot be explained solely by ethnic background.

Is it then a question of funding? Inner-London boroughs historically benefited from much higher-per-pupil funding than elsewhere because they were among the most deprived. But Manchester and Liverpool also do relatively well, especially when the effects of increased London pay are stripped out. Around two-thirds of any extra money London receives is spent on higher wages for staff.

Higher spend doesn't automatically lead to better performance. Nottingham, which has one of the highest-per-pupil funding settlements in the country outside London, has one of the worst records at secondary – only 42.4% of its youngsters got 5 good GCSEs, including English and maths, last year.

## **What needs to be done?**

Yes, London has advantages that other cities lack, but what of Liverpool or Manchester? Are you really telling me that they lack swagger and dynamism? That they cannot succeed in the way London has succeeded? These are the cities that built Britain. They pioneered a modern, civic education when students at certain other universities spent most of their time studying the New Testament in Greek.

Today, Manchester and Liverpool boast 8 universities between them, 2 of which are among the top 200 in the world. They are beacons of higher educational excellence. But if these cities can provide a world-class education for youngsters at 18, why on earth are they failing to do so for too many at 11?

At some point, we have to accept that our children's education can be better – or worse – because of the choices we make. At some point, politicians in Manchester and Liverpool will have to

accept that the Northern Powerhouse will splutter and die if their youngsters lack the skills to sustain it.

Back in the early nineties, the prospects for schools in Hackney, where I taught, seemed as bleak as many areas in the North and Midlands seem today. Only 14% of youngsters in the borough gained a good GCSE in 1990.

Leadership turned things around. But school leaders didn't do it by themselves. They had recognizable local champions, politicians like Jules Pipe in Hackney and Robin Wales in Newham who took responsibility for the performance of their local schools – all schools, not just those under their direct control.

They expected results and refused to accept excuses from any of them. Their priority was, and remains, the better education of children. They did not allow varying school structures to deflect them from that objective. All children in every school were their children and all schools would be held to account for their performance.

This is what needs to happen now in Manchester and Liverpool. I appreciate that it isn't easy and I accept that improvement can't happen overnight. 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 who are employed let alone university educated.

Nor am I calling for a return to micro-management of schools by town halls or for new local educational powers. But I am talking about political will and vision. I am calling on local politicians, be they mayors, council leaders or cabinet members, to stand up and be counted, to shoulder responsibility for their local schools, to challenge and support them regardless of whether they are academies or not. I'm calling on them to be visible, high-profile figures that people can recognize as education champions. I am calling on them to make education in general – and their underperforming secondary schools in particular – a central target of their strategy for growth. I am asking them to better understand that unless there are high standards in the major

cities of our country then good practice will not radiate out to the satellite towns and communities outside those cities.

Unless they do, I fear Manchester and Liverpool will never become the economic powerhouses we want them to be. We cannot fight for social mobility with political immobility. Politicians need to act. It requires grit, imagination, faith and bloody mindedness – qualities that, fortunately, I really don't think are less common in the North than they are down South.

Thank you.

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From:

**Ofsted**

**Sir Michael Wilshaw**

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