Speech

Ambitions for education: Sir Michael Wilshaw

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Ofsted's Chief Inspector spoke at CentreForum setting out his ambitions for education, including the need to improve vocational training.

Thank you for inviting me to talk to you today.

There will be many who think your ambitions for the future of English education are too bold and too unrealistic. I am not one of them. We simply have to aim high. Unless we can compete with the best jurisdictions in the world, all our hopes for a fair, cohesive and prosperous society will come to very little.

High expectations are essential to those ambitions. As a teacher and later head in some of the toughest parts of London, I had high expectations for each and every child in every classroom.

As I look back, I am proud to say that many of them lived up to

those expectations. Most of my former pupils went on to lead successful lives, even though many came from poor backgrounds with limited experience of success. I was as proud of the student from a troubled family who started his own plumbing business as I was of the former pupil who ended up as the first black president of the Oxford Union.

The youngsters in schools that I led did well because we exploited their different talents and provided them with different pathways to success. A great all-ability school ensures that those with potential can be surgeons as well as nurses, architects as well as joiners, technocrats as well as technicians.

The great comprehensive school headteacher knows that a ‘one size fits all’ model of secondary education will never deliver the range of success that their youngsters need.

Some of our international competitors understand this probably better than we do.

Their education systems are more flexible than ours and are much more geared to aligning the potential of the student with the needs of their economies. As a result, countries with excellent academic and technical routes have far lower youth unemployment than we do. Despite 6 years of economic recovery and falling unemployment, youth unemployment in the UK still stands at 12%. In Germany it is 7% and in Switzerland 3.7%.

If our neighbours understand this, why don’t we? Surely we have got to understand that rebalancing our economy means rebalancing our education system as well – a point I’ll elaborate on later.

As Chief Inspector I have high ambitions for every child and every classroom in the country. Every child – not just those who are easy to teach – and every classroom – not just those in prosperous or urban communities.

All improvement is incremental. We know that. And the targets that CentreForum has set will take time to achieve. But setting

the course and being clear about the destination are essential if standards are to improve.

You are right to emphasise the importance of a good early years education and mastery of English and maths at primary. If 85% of pupils manage to achieve at least a 4b at Key Stage 2 by 2025, then your expectations for three quarters of our young people to achieve good outcomes at 16 by 2030 should be perfectly feasible.

But what of the quarter to a third of youngsters who cannot achieve those challenging targets? What is to become of them? Even when I was head at Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, which had a great academic reputation, 20% of youngsters failed to reach our targets. Most of them went to a local FE [further education] college, usually a large, impersonal and amorphous institution, and did badly.

As somebody who was motivated by moral purpose, I always felt that I was letting down a significant number of good children who deserved better. Talk to any good secondary head and they would say much the same.

Yes, our ambitions should be bold. But they should be inclusive too. Our responsibilities as educators do not end when students fail to attain our targets. On the contrary, the written off and the ‘failed’ need our help most and we should never forget it.

Our ambition has to be broad if we are to ensure a step change in educational achievement. And it has to be deep. Vaulting ambition cannot succeed if its foundations are shallow. But I’m afraid our foundations in some areas are very shallow indeed. We do not have enough good leaders. We do not have enough good governors. And struggling schools in many areas of the country are finding it extremely difficult to get the good teachers they need.

Reform requires reformers and in many places we simply lack the talented people necessary to make progress happen. We are facing real capacity issues that need to be addressed urgently if we are to maintain our current performance, let alone the

accelerated improvement demanded by CentreForum.

Improvements

The start of a new year, however, is a time for optimism. And even though the challenges before us are great, we have much to be optimistic about. We have a far better education system than we did when I first became a head 30 years ago.

People forget how bad things were in the miserable decades of the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s. They forget how many children were failed by political neglect, misguided ideologies, weak accountability and low expectations. They forget how local authorities failed to challenge and support headteachers. They forget how much they conceded to vested interests and how infrequently they championed the rights of children to a decent education.

Before we steel ourselves for the challenges ahead, we should remember how far we have come. Before critics disparage our schools, they should recall our recent history. Ambition has to be sustained by hope. And it’s a lot easier to hope if we remember that standards have improved, and can improve further.

Across the country as a whole, nearly a million and a half more children are in good or better schools than were 5 years ago. The proportion of newly qualified teachers with good degrees has never been higher, while the proportion of the poorest pupils going to university has increased from an eighth to a fifth in a decade.

The most dramatic turnaround, as your report notes, has been in our primary schools. Primary schools are getting the basics right. Literacy and numeracy are much improved. There has been a steady rise in performance at Key Stage 2 – the results last year are the highest on record. And although much work needs to be done, primary schools have succeeded in narrowing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers. So I have every confidence, on the basis of what we know about primary schools, that your targets of 85% of children achieving a

level 4B in reading, writing and mathematics will, again, be entirely feasible by 2025.

Ofsted's greater challenge to the system has helped to bring about some of these improvements. The abolition of the satisfactory judgement and its replacement with 'requires improvement' signalled that the inspectorate would no longer accept mediocrity. I also believe that our new proportionate inspections of good schools, the end of inspections by third-party contractors and the recruitment of thousands of serving school leaders as inspectors have helped to refine and improve Ofsted's oversight.

But for all these improvements, we would be deluding ourselves if we thought the battle to raise standards had been won. There is still much more to do. There can be no let up on educational reform because our international competitors are improving at a faster rate than we are.

There are many challenges facing our education system but 3 are acute:

- the gains made by children in primary schools are often lost in secondaries
- a disproportionate amount of that underperformance is in the North and the Midlands
- educational provision, for the many children who do not succeed at 16 or who would prefer an alternative to higher education, is inadequate at best and non-existent at worst

Stalling secondary schools

As I said earlier, the improvements in primary education have been significant and widespread. Sadly, they are not sustained in many secondary schools. Things often go badly wrong at the very start of Key Stage 3.

Poor transition, poor literacy and numeracy, a lack of monitoring and poor teaching, particularly in foundation subjects, fail to prepare children for exams at Key Stage 4. Widespread, low-

level disruption adds to the problem. It means that in many secondaries almost an hour of learning is lost each day because of poor behaviour. Quite frankly the culture of too many of our secondary schools is just not good enough. Instead of fostering a climate of scholarship and deep learning, inspectors see too many secondary schools with noisy corridors, lippy children and sullen classrooms. This, perhaps, explains why the caricatures of comprehensive secondary education are still well embedded in our media and popular culture.

It is no surprise then that 45% of our youngsters fail to achieve the benchmark GCSE grades, and just under 1 in 4 succeeds at EBacc. Yes, more disadvantaged and state school pupils now go to university than ever before. But disproportionately few of them go to our top universities.

According to the Office for Fair Access, teenagers from the richest 20% of families are 6 times more likely to go to the most selective universities than youngsters from the most disadvantaged 40% of families.

The fate of the most able pupils in non-selective schools is particularly depressing. Some 60,000 youngsters who achieved the top levels at Key Stage 2 did not achieve an A or A* in English and maths 5 years later. Indeed, only a quarter achieved a B grade.

According to the Sutton Trust, 7,000 children a year who were in the top 10% nationally at age 11 were not in the top 25% at GCSE 5 years later. These youngsters are drawn disproportionately from the white working class.

One stark fact probably sums up our under-performance at secondary more than any other: the gap in attainment between free school meal students and their peers has barely shifted in a decade.

Unless we raise the performance of disadvantaged pupils in general, and the white working class in particular, we won’t achieve the targets that you’ve set out in your paper.

The North and the Midlands

As I pointed out in my last Annual Report, a disproportionate amount of secondary schools that are less than good are in the North and the Midlands. One in three secondaries in these regions is not good enough. Of the 16 local authorities with the poorest performing secondary schools, 13 are in the North and the Midlands.

It is no coincidence that these regions also account for the largest proportion of schools with behaviour and leadership problems. Three quarters of secondary schools judged inadequate for behaviour and for leadership were in the North and the Midlands.

Let me give you a sense of the scale of the challenge facing us. In 2015, in some of our biggest towns and cities in the North and the Midlands, less than half of our young people achieved 5 good GCSEs.

In Liverpool it was 48%. In Manchester it was 46%, in Bradford 45%, in Blackpool 42%. And in Knowsley, a local authority area without a single good secondary school, only 37% of young people achieved 5 A* to C grades in English and maths.

CentreForum has set ambitious targets for English schools to meet at Key Stage 4. It is going to be a challenge for the average performing school's students to reach the new minimum acceptable grade 5, assessed between the present C and B grade. How much harder will it be for children in struggling schools, disproportionately concentrated in the North and the Midlands, to reach them from such a low base?

Left behind at 16

No area of the country, however, can really claim to succeed when it comes to provision for those youngsters who do not do well at 16. Nor can we say that we are really delivering high-quality vocational education to youngsters of all abilities who would prefer to take this route.

The statistics show that those who fail to achieve the required grades in maths and English at 16 make little or no progress in FE colleges 2 years later. The 16-19 Study Programme is yet to make an impact on these success rates.

Preparation for employment remains poor and careers guidance in both schools and colleges is uniformly weak.

But my goodness, the country needs these youngsters. Fifty years ago John Newsom warned that by failing them we beggared ourselves. “Half our future”, he pointed out, is in these young people’s hands. We cannot continue to fail half our future. Yet in the intervening half century, what has changed?

Nine out of 10 employers, according to the British Chambers of Commerce, say school leavers are not ready for employment. Six out of 10 firms say the skills gap is getting worse. Leading industrialists like Sir James Dyson complain that they cannot find the skilled workers their businesses need to grow.

Our system is adept at guiding students into higher education. But it still struggles, despite the recent focus on apprenticeships, to inform them about alternatives to university. 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 with the skills they need and employers want.

I can almost sense eyes glazing over when I say this. For over 50 years, I’ve heard so many people bemoan the fact that vocational education is not good enough. So at the risk of switching you off, I’m going to say it again. It is a moral imperative as well as an economic one that we do something now to change direction. We must all make sure that the ambitious programme for apprenticeships does not prove to be another false dawn. And, even more importantly, that the school system prepares youngsters for these apprenticeship places.

This does not mean diluting a strong core curriculum. There should be no trade-off between the quality of academic studies and the pursuit of specialist vocational provision and training.

So I applaud CentreForum's bold aims for English education. There is no good reason why the vast majority of pupils shouldn't have mastered basic maths and English at primary and a Grade 5 at GCSE.

However, we should never forget the minority who will never do so, nor the larger number who may pass but who do not wish to pursue a wholly academic path. They too deserve an education worthy of the name. The country cannot continue to fail half its future.

What is to be done?

Yes - the challenges facing our secondary schools and colleges in particular are immense. But these challenges can be met. CentreForum has highlighted how a number of schools are bucking the trend and are succeeding. They show what is possible with great leadership and great teaching.

Yet individual success stories also show how daunting the task is. They stand out because they are so atypical. The question is, how can we scale up improvement? How can individual success be replicated across the board?

Even if we have an answer to that, there is another pressing issue. How can we ensure that we have capacity in the system to bring about essential improvements? Because without the right people to make it happen, our dreams will remain just that.

We need to improve 3 things:

- accountability and oversight
- the way schools of all types work together
- leadership, and the leadership of teaching in particular

Accountability and oversight

For a start, we will struggle to embed reform if oversight remains confused and inconsistent. I have long argued for a middle tier to

oversee school performance and intervene where necessary. So the government's decision to introduce Regional Schools Commissioners to oversee academies is one I support. Unfortunately, their roles and how they fit with other accountability bodies isn't always clear.

Ofsted is charged with inspecting all schools and colleges. The Education Funding Agency not only funds schools but also intervenes when decline occurs. Individual multi-academy trusts have their own oversight arrangements and then there are local authorities. The latter complain they lack any influence over academies, even though they are still responsible for ensuring all children in their area are safe and receive a suitable standard of education. It is a patchwork of accountability rather than the seamless cover we need.

At the moment, we have a confusing and ill-defined system of oversight and intervention. Problems, inevitably, are shuffled between various agencies. This isn't fair on parents and it certainly isn't fair on schools. A symptom of that confusion has been a more than doubling of complaints to Ofsted about schools in the last 3 years. The danger is that only those able to navigate this accountability maze will have their concerns addressed.

Governance, too, is an issue. Three years ago I argued that school governing bodies needed to be far more professional. In that time, not a lot has changed. We need governors chosen for the skills they bring to a school, not because they represent a certain faction. We need governors who will hold schools properly to account, not who are largely concerned with furthering vested interests. And if that means paying for expertise, then we should consider paying them.

As we all know, the key to school improvement is early intervention. But can we realistically expect commissioners, with their current resources, to gather the necessary intelligence on the increasing number of schools under their control? Will they be able to step in when it matters most?

Now, I am not going to argue for the return of all schools to local

authority control, far from it. The rot set in in large parts of our education system because local authorities allowed too many schools to decay over many years. But it would greatly simplify matters if all schools were held to account in the same way.

I have no doubt that commissioners will grow into their roles and my regional directors will continue to work alongside them. But, I think we are going to need something more if we are to bring about the kind of improvement we have seen in London.

We need powerful political figures who feel responsible to local people for the performance of local schools. Mayors like Robin Wales and Jules Pipe in London, who see it as their personal responsibility to improve underperforming schools in east London, with impressive results.

Obviously, it is a matter for government whether the recent drive to devolve powers locally should include education. But, even without more formal powers, shouldn't local politicians take more responsibility for education and expect more of their schools?

Improvement across such a complex system needs strong leadership that is aware of local weaknesses and isn't afraid to confront vested interests. In such a complex system, parents need clarity about who will stand up for them and their children. In such a complex system, someone with local knowledge needs to ensure that there are good schools for all, not just for those lucky enough to live in the right postcodes.

It can be done. Improvements in London are beginning to radiate across the capital and into surrounding areas as schools and politicians set higher and higher expectations. London has become a nursery for success. I know of outstanding headteachers who have chosen to leave the capital and work further afield.

If it can happen in London, it can happen elsewhere. But it won't happen by accident or committee. Local politicians in Manchester, Newcastle, Liverpool and Leeds now need to provide the leadership and drive regardless of the powers bequeathed by Whitehall.

A truly comprehensive system

The second issue we have to address is the lingering damage caused by the botched reform of our schools in the ’60s and ’70s. Let me say straightaway that I am not going to argue for selection or a return to grammar schools. But the ideologues who drove the comprehensive agenda confused equality with equity. They took it to mean that one size should fit all.

As a consequence, there was a wholesale dumbing down of standards. It meant aggressive anti-elitism. It meant glittering prizes for all, whether merited or not. It meant scorning attempts to celebrate excellence. It meant paying scant regard to literacy, numeracy and good behaviour. It meant the erosion of headteacher authority by militant unionism.

For those who can’t remember those times, look up the history of Highbury Grove, or Holland Park or Hackney Downs to see what can go badly wrong in schools more interested in ideological conformity than educational excellence. Look up the initiatives that encrusted schools like useless barnacles, such as the SMILE maths programme, which encouraged children to amble up to the filing cabinet, pick out their worksheet and learn at their own speed.

I’m pleased to say that much of that nonsense has gone. There is now a growing awareness of the needs of different pupils. However, as I said at the beginning, the one-size-fits-all approach still lets down far too many, particularly at both ends of the ability spectrum. The most able are not being stretched. The options for those who struggle are limited. And too few children have access to a curriculum that prepares them for the workplace.

There is another, unremarked disadvantage to many comprehensive schools. They expect teachers to do too many things. Some teachers are good at teaching able students; others are better with youngsters with special educational needs. Teachers, like everyone else, are rarely good at everything. Yet

many comprehensives treat them as if they are. In smaller secondaries, with limited numbers of staff, they have no choice but to do this.

Teachers may be required to teach a high-flying sixth form group in one lesson and a low-ability Year 7 group in the next. On top of this, they are expected to be pastoral tutors, behaviour experts, playground patrollers and outreach workers. It's no wonder they become exhausted. It isn't good for them, the students or the school.

We have a real opportunity to put this right. The raising of the participation age to 18, the increased freedoms offered to school leaders, the incentives for schools to collaborate within academy trusts provide us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a smarter comprehensive system, without the need for more legislation or further structural change.

Let me explain what I mean. If I were running a group of schools, I would include both primaries and secondaries. I would make sure the primary schools were either working closely with local nurseries or taking children from the age of 2 into on-site early years provision. I would work with local health visitors to make sure disadvantaged 2 year olds were taking available places.

I would make sure the secondary schools learnt from what is working well at primary. I would make sure the different phases worked together to understand and track pupil progress. And I would appoint a heavy-hitting senior leader to track free school meal pupils from one phase to the next.

I would include in my federation a 14-19 university technical college that would admit youngsters across the ability range to focus on apprenticeships at levels 4, 3 and 2. It would not be a dumping ground for the disaffected and cater just for the lower-ability youngsters.

Careers advice across the federation would be a priority, with a real focus on Year 9 to ensure that each student, at the end of Key Stage 3, had a clear sense of the different pathways in front of them.

In my ideal federation, English, maths and science teachers would be contracted to work in the partnership and would be obliged to move across the different schools in the consortium. I would encourage extensive business and school links and introduce salary incentives to attract the best leaders to work in the more complex and challenging institutions.

Working in this joined-up way across phases and school types would have 3 powerful effects. First, youngsters would be able to transfer across institutions in the cluster and access high-level academic and technical study.

Second, teachers would have better opportunities for increased specialisation and professional development.

Third, if done transparently and effectively, such federations would allow improvements to cascade through the system because they would be implemented across the organisation and not left to individual schools.

Let me be clear – what I would want to offer is not selection at 14 but maximum opportunity at 14. Above all, I would want all routes through the federation to have equal prestige in the eyes of pupils, teachers and parents.

School leadership

As I said earlier, creating a federation like that would not require legislation or massive structural change. But it would require leadership, imagination and courage. Leadership is the third aspect of the system that I believe is crucial for wide-ranging school improvement. So we have to ask ourselves – do we have enough people with the right skills? And if we don't – what are we going to do about it?

This isn't just a question of raw numbers. It is also about the need to identify talented individuals and incentivize them to move to the schools that need them most. As we move to a much more autonomous system, with so much depending on appointing people who know how to use the freedoms given to them, it is

vital that we do more to nurture leadership.

All our evidence shows that it is good leadership that makes the biggest difference to school standards. Yet, many areas of the country, especially those with a disproportionate amount of poorly performing schools, simply do not have access to the calibre of leadership required. What's worse, there is no reliable regional data to highlight what the local situation really is.

Our inspections of the weakest academy chains show that they have the same problems as weak local authorities – poor governance, confusing lines of responsibility, insufficient monitoring and inadequate intervention.

More and more responsibility now rests with chief executives of academy trusts. Yet how many programmes are there to train them in best practice? How are we making sure we identify potential leaders at an early stage of their careers? How are we incentivising them? What programmes are in place to support them? Far too few, I fear.

No organisation in the private sector would have such a haphazard approach to leadership training. Indeed, it's hard to believe any other service in the public sector has such a laissez-faire attitude to career development. Can you imagine a trainee medic not being aware of the ladder they have to climb if they wish to progress and the training necessary for it? But that is the state of affairs confronting our young teachers.

You highlight in your paper a number of schools that are already achieving your targets. I know many of the headteachers of these schools well. The reason they are good is because they learnt their craft working with successful heads elsewhere. This model needs to be developed nationally. Leaving it to the market will not do. We can't leave it, for example, to a mediocre academy chain with a paucity of good leaders to model excellent practice from which others can learn. It needs a national programme, bought into by everyone and which harnesses the support of the best heads in the land.

There are, of course, admirable leadership programmes set up

by charities such as Future Leaders. But they are too small and piecemeal to address the entire problem. If we are to meet the targets you have set for 2030, we have to expand the best practice you have identified in a few schools across the whole country. If we are to improve our secondary schools we must beef up our leadership programmes. That requires joined-up thinking. It requires a far more strategic approach to leadership training.

Conclusion

I hope it is clear that I am not offering a counsel of despair but a call to arms. I share your ambitions for a step change in the quality of English education. But this will only happen if we address the confusion around school accountability, if we encourage schools of all types to work together in tight partnerships and federations. Most of all, we must stop paying lip service to improving vocational education and get on and do it.

It means we need national politicians to step up to the plate and we need local politicians to take more responsibility for education standards in their area. It means we need joined-up accountability and school partnerships that cater for the needs of all pupils. And it means identifying and developing the next generation of school leaders so that they can create the conditions in which teachers can thrive.

We are right to be ambitious. The conditions are there. We need to act now and we need to act together, because history will not forgive us if we let this moment pass.

Thank you.

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Sir Michael Wilshaw

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