

## Speech

# Sir Michael Wilshaw's speech at the London Councils education summit

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)  
Delivered on: 5 September 2016 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)  
First published: 5 September 2016

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke at the London Councils education summit in central London.



Hello everyone and thank you for inviting me to speak at your conference this morning.

As an ex-London teacher and headteacher of many years standing, it is great to be here. It is also entirely fitting that my first speech of this new academic year is at an event focusing on outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

As most of you will know, this autumn term marks the end of my 5-year term of office as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. Throughout my tenure, I have been motivated by a commitment

to improve the prospects of children from poor backgrounds and to reduce the long tail of underachievement – especially in our secondary schools.

It has been my driving mission and the issue that has exercised me more than any other. Not only is it a moral and economic imperative that as a nation we do better for our poorest youngsters, it is also key to raising school standards overall. Experience tells us that improvement in schools starts from the bottom. If you raise the performance of the poorest and most challenging pupils, you almost always raise performance across the board in the process.

You will know that I have been very critical of those parts of the country where poor children continue to be let down and where pupil premium money is being squandered.

I have also been determined to ensure that Ofsted inspectors are taking a tough line with those schools where poor children – especially the most able poor – consistently underperform.

That is why I am so pleased to have the opportunity to address you here today. As we all know, London is leading the way in narrowing the attainment gap between rich and poor.

It has maintained its status as the top performing region across all key stages when it comes to the performance of children eligible for free school meals.

As someone who has spent their entire professional career in this city, I never cease to be amazed by the transformation that London schools have undergone since the miserable decades of the 1970s, 80s and 90s when they were truly bottom of the national pile.

London Challenge was, of course, the catalyst that radically improved standards in our capital city. It took ownership of underperformance and confronted failure in a way that had never been done before. The fact that you have been able to sustain and build on the success of London Challenge is something you should be rightly proud of.

The soaring success of London schools – especially in inner-London – surely makes a mockery of the claim that opening up many more grammar schools is the key to unlocking the potential of disadvantaged children and to boosting social mobility.

The question I would put to those clamouring for a return to selection by ability at the age of 11 is this:

If grammar schools are the great answer, why aren't there more of them in London?

If they are such a good thing for poor children, then why are poor children here in the capital doing so much better than their counterparts in those parts of the country that operate selection?

I appreciate that many grammar schools do a fine job in equipping their students with an excellent education. But we all know that their record of admitting children from non-middle-class backgrounds is pretty woeful.

We certainly see that in areas like Kent and Buckinghamshire. But we also see it in the small number of London boroughs that have grammar schools. The proportion of disadvantaged children in the 4 grammar schools in Bexley, for example, is around 9% compared to 28% in its non-selective schools. Similarly in Sutton, where 5 out of the 14 schools are grammar schools, the proportions are about 7% compared to 25%.

The notion that the poor stand to benefit from the return of grammar schools strikes me as quite palpable tosh and nonsense – and is very clearly refuted by the London experience.

Take my old stomping ground, Hackney, for example, which has more than its fair share of social problems and economic deprivation – and with not a grammar school to be found for miles around. Every single secondary school in the borough is currently judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding. Nearly 8 out of 10 of Hackney's most able pupils last year obtained at least a B grade at GCSE maths and English. Sixty two per cent

of its youngsters go on to university compared to 48% in the country as a whole.

It is hard to believe that bringing back selection to this part of London would improve the prospects of children, especially from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In Hackney, the gap in attainment at key stage 4 between free school meal and non-free school meal pupils is 14.6%. In Kent, which operates selection, the gap is nearly 34%.

And let's not delude ourselves. 'A grammar school in every town', as some are calling for, would also mean 3 secondary moderns in every town – a consequence rarely mentioned.

That is why I am in no doubt that a return to selection would be a profoundly retrograde step that would actually lead to overall standards sliding back, not improving.

Only now are we really starting to see the long-term impact of the education reforms that were embarked on under Tony Blair's premiership and carried on by Michael Gove and his successors.

It's still early days but it was heartening – for example - to see that the proportion of Team GB medallists who attended a comprehensive school climbed to 60% in Rio from 56% in London 4 years earlier. Similarly, the proportion of comprehensive-school-educated MPs went up from 43% in 2010 to 49% at last year's general election. And last week, we heard that Oxford University's intake of new students this autumn will include the highest proportion of state school pupils for at least 40 years.

Why jeopardise these nascent but welcome signs of progress by turning back the clock?

Instead, we should allow more time for the school-led improvement revolution of recent years to take proper effect. We should be doing what we can to replicate what has been happening in Hackney and other London boroughs in those parts of the country still languishing in the educational doldrums.

However, I fear the clarion call of the 'bring back grammar

schools' lobby will grow ever louder and more persuasive unless more of our secondary schools start delivering for all of their children. Because let's face it, in many ways, London is the striking exception to the rule.

You will know that in my last 2 Annual Reports, I have highlighted serious concerns about the performance of secondary schools in other parts of the country, especially in the North and the Midlands and those serving the poorest and most isolated communities. Too many schools are still letting down their most able pupils and failing to narrow the attainment gap between rich and poor. They are still not sending nearly enough youngsters to our top universities.

My final report later this year will no doubt say something similar. It is a situation that those of us committed to the principle of comprehensive education simply cannot allow to continue.

## **Leadership is key**

Opinion is often divided on the exact reasons why London continues to forge ahead of the rest of the country. There is undoubtedly some truth in the argument that as the nation's all-powerful and dynamic capital city, it can attract the best teaching talent. The high proportion of children from aspirational immigrant families must also be a factor.

However, what has really made the difference can be summed up in one simple word: leadership.

London could never have succeeded in improving outcomes for its poorest children if it didn't have the right calibre of people in charge of running its schools.

Leaders with an unwavering ambition and commitment to the cause of raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap. Leaders who know how to handle and exploit the freedoms that have been given to them. Leaders who make sure they can count on the full support of a dedicated teaching staff prepared to go the extra mile for the young people in their charge.

These leaders can be found in schools across the capital. In places like Mossbourne in Hackney, Woodside High School in Haringey, King Solomon Academy in Westminster and Ark Academy in Brent.

I mention these schools because they are ones I happen to know very well. But there are dozens of other examples that I could cite.

All of these leaders come with their own particular style and brand of headship. But the common characteristic they all share is an absolute understanding that if you succeed in improving the lot of the most disadvantaged children in your school, then you move everybody else up with them.

While there is much to celebrate here in London, we should guard against any sense of complacency or an assumption that excellence is spread evenly across the capital.

When it comes to educational performance, there is a tendency on the part of commentators to regard the capital as a single entity. Like the Emerald City in 'The Wizard of Oz', from a distance it all looks pretty perfect. But when you look more closely, the cracks are evident.

You will know as well as I do that there are pockets of London that are not doing as well – especially in some of the outer-London boroughs. In places like Richmond, Sutton, Bromley and Kingston-upon-Thames, the attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils is as wide as in areas like Reading and West Berkshire, which have been criticised by Ofsted for failing their poorer children. It is surely no coincidence that the proportion of children eligible for free school meals is smaller in these more affluent boroughs than in other parts of the capital. Our research consistently shows that in the South East in particular, when poor children are in a significant minority at their school, they are more likely to do badly.

Across London as a whole, outcomes for certain ethnic groups remain stubbornly low. The performance of poor White British pupils, in particular, is still not good enough. Last year, only 33%

of this group achieved the benchmark 5 good GCSEs including English and mathematics – above the national figure of 28% but still a cause for concern. In 2 London local authorities, poor White British children actually did worse than in the country as a whole.

The situation is no better for free school meal children, especially boys, from a Caribbean background. In 10 London boroughs, less than a third of these children attained 5 good GCSEs including English and mathematics in 2015.

As I have already highlighted, there are many schools in London that are doing a fantastic job in raising the attainment of poorer children, including White British and Caribbean youngsters.

If they can do it, why can't others?

Well we certainly need more great leaders in those parts of the capital that are not performing as well.

And if you believe, as I do, that system improvement has to be led by the profession itself, we also need more leaders who know how to run a number of schools as executive headteachers.

This is one of the biggest challenges we face. We know that not every great headteacher is cut out to successfully run more than one school. That is why I have been so vocal about putting more emphasis on national leadership programmes.

As things currently stand, we lack the right infrastructure for identifying enough people with the potential to step up to headship as well as executive headship.

While great leadership is essential, political will and vision is another vital ingredient in transforming standards.

That is where you come in. You have a crucial role to play in championing and challenging your schools and refusing to accept mediocrity.

Back in the 1990s, school leaders like myself had the backing of

recognisable local champions like Jules Pipe in Hackney and Robin Wales in Newham.

They were determined to take responsibility for the performance of all their local schools – not just those under the council's direct control.

They expected results and did not tolerate excuses. Their priority was, and remains, the better education of children. They did not allow varying school structures to deflect them from that objective.

We need more local politicians like them across the country. Whether elected mayors, council leaders or cabinet members, we need people who are prepared 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.

In saying all this today, I'm conscious I could be accused of preaching to the converted. Because if you didn't already think this was part of your job then you probably wouldn't be here in this room today.

Nevertheless, it is worth driving home the point that as education cabinet members, it is right that you take an interest in who is being appointed to run the academies and free schools in your area.

Are you meeting regularly with these leaders or are you content to leave it to the regional school commissioner?

Do you and your DCS take an active interest in these schools?  
Do you look at the data?

If you are worried about an underperforming school or multi-academy trust in your patch, do you write or pick up the phone to the RSC to voice your concern?

Don't think that you are out of the loop. The best local authority leaders are the ones who are proactive in supporting and challenging their local academy schools.



As I prepare to step down from my role as Chief Inspector, I'd like to end today by assuring you that I remain an optimist. As a young teacher and later headteacher in this city, I never dreamt that London schools would be able to transform themselves in the way they have. We need to somehow bottle what has happened here and use it to raise standards across the whole of the country.

We need national policies to tackle the urgent challenges of teacher shortages and the quality of leadership. We need to ensure that the best multi-academy trusts, the best leaders and the best teachers are incentivised to work in the areas where they are needed most.

I would never underestimate how difficult it is to educate children who are poor and who lack all the advantages that a more affluent background confers. However, the experience of London shows that with enough collective commitment and ambition, we can break the pattern of underachievement and create a fairer and more equal society.

If London can succeed, then why not Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield?

As leaders of education in our capital city, you are playing a vital role in supporting many excellent and inspiring schools that are demonstrating exactly what needs to be done.

I remain confident that if others can learn from these schools, we will have an education system that the country expects and our children deserve.

Thank you for listening.

Share this page



Published:

From:

5 September 2016

Ofsted

Sir Michael Wilshaw

[Is there anything wrong with this page?](#)

## Services and information

[Benefits](#)

[Births, deaths, marriages and care](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

## Departments and policy

[How government works](#)

[Departments](#)

[Worldwide](#)

[Policies](#)

[Publications](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Help](#) [Cookies](#) [Contact](#) [Terms and conditions](#)

[Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg](#) Built by the [Government Digital Service](#)

**OGI** All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



© Crown copyright

