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Speech

Nick Gibb: the role of academy directors in school improvement

From: [Department for Education](#) and [Nick Gibb MP](#)
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School Standards Minister Nick Gibb addresses the Academy Ambassadors conference.



Good morning and thank you for that kind introduction.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak at the Academy Ambassadors Board Development Day.

First, I want to thank Academy Ambassadors and each one of you for the important work that you do.

Over the last 12 years, first as Shadow Schools Minister and subsequently Minister of State at the Department for Education, I

have had the opportunity to visit over 400 schools around the country. This has taught me an enormous amount about schools and school improvement. For me, there are 2 components without which a school cannot be a great school:

- high-quality teaching and leadership in school; and
- a stretching knowledge-led curriculum

I agree with Academy Ambassadors that high-calibre professionals are well positioned to support CEOs and executive principals as their academy trusts develop. In particular, I believe that business experience can bring added challenge and scrutiny to the hugely important role of the governing board.

By volunteering your time and expertise, you are helping to ensure that the education system of this country is one that successfully helps all children to fulfil their ambitions and, indeed, is one that encourages and nurtures ambition.

Since 2010, over 1.4 million more children are in good or outstanding schools. In part, this is due to successful, evidence-based policies such as a determined focus on phonics in primary schools and the EBacc in secondary schools. Thanks to these reforms, over 120,000 more 6-year-olds were reading more effectively last year and the proportion of pupils taking core academic subjects at GCSE is up by almost four-fifths.

But for these standards-focused reforms to improve schools, we also need the structural changes that have been made to the education system. Thanks to the academies programme, schools have been liberated from the constraints which too often inhibited great teaching.

Trail-blazing academy chains are making use of freedoms to develop pioneering knowledge-rich curricula. King Solomon Academy's maths mastery curriculum is shifting the way secondary maths is taught throughout the country.

Maths hubs, funded by the government, are introducing the Asian-style mastery approach to primary mathematics. This method of instruction has achieved world-leading success - with

children in jurisdictions using this method often around 2 years ahead of English children by age 15. In Shanghai, for example, the teaching ensures there is fluency and a deep understanding of mathematics from the start, with a focus on mastering the subject and using teaching methods that work.

The autonomy granted by the structural reforms has freed schools to innovate and pursue improved teaching methods and a better school ethos.

This, I believe, is where strong systems of governance are crucial.

As Minister for School Standards I try to visit as many schools as I can. Knowledge of what is happening in the classroom is key to good policy and good governance.

Understanding school data is crucial to holding multi-academy trusts and school leaders to account, but good governance also requires looking at qualitative issues as well.

What is the behaviour like in your schools? In 2014, Ofsted published 'Below the radar', a damning report into the prevalence of low level disruption in classrooms. The report highlighted that some teachers believed their school leaders were unaware of this disruption. According to the report this poor behaviour included:

- pupils calling out without permission
- instructions being ignored or followed grudgingly
- mobile devices being used inappropriately
- and pupils showing a lack of respect towards staff

The impact of this behaviour, which still too often goes unchallenged by teachers and headteachers, was an estimated 38 days of lost teaching a year, on average.

Terry Haydn, in his 2014 paper 'To what extent is behaviour a problem in English classrooms', notes the sad irony at the continued prevalence of disruption given what the overwhelming majority of parents, pupils, teachers and policy makers want - a calm and ordered classroom where all pupils can learn.

Tom Bennett recently led a behaviour review for us, with the aim of ensuring new teachers are fully trained in dealing with disruptive children. To complement the initial teacher training review, Tom Bennett is also leading a further review of behaviour management in schools and he will make recommendations on how to prevent and tackle classroom disruption, maintain good discipline and free all teachers to teach and allow all pupils to learn.

These recommendations will support you in ensuring the schools in your academy trust allow every pupil to go as far as their talents will take them. An understanding of the classroom culture in your schools will help you probe the school-level data more incisively.

The EBacc is one of a number of accountability measures which promotes the teaching of an academic curriculum to all children. To qualify for the English Baccalaureate a pupil has to achieve GCSEs at grade C or higher in English, maths, at least 2 sciences, a humanity (either geography or history) and a foreign language.

In my view all children must have access to an academic core of knowledge. We are making progress on this front, but there is still a long way to go. There are still too many pupils - particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds - who do not study a full academic curriculum.

One in 5 of this country's most able disadvantaged pupils are in a school which doesn't offer them the opportunity to study triple science GCSEs.

Does your school give pupils the opportunity to study the 3 separate sciences?

There are still many in the education sector who claim that an academic education isn't suitable for some pupils. To these people, I suggest they read the Sutton Trust's research into the impact of schools which enthusiastically adopted the English Baccalaureate curriculum.

At so called 'curriculum change' schools - where EBacc entry typically rose from 8% of pupils to 48% - the pupil premium gap reduced relative to schools with similar intakes. At these schools, the EBacc achievement gap closed by 6 percentage points more than in the matched schools.

The narrative that accompanied the Sutton Trust report concluded that disadvantaged pupils benefitted most from this switch in focus because, and I quote, "the gap in the proportion achieving 5+ A* to C closed by 1 percentage point more than in the matched schools and the proportion achieving the EBacc closed by 6 percentage points more than in the matched schools."

Unfortunately, the benefits of an academic curriculum are not extended to all pupils. The same report identified that 11,000 disadvantaged pupils are not being given the same opportunity to study a modern foreign language as their similarly able peers. This figure rises to 15,000 when one considers the gap in humanities entries.

For schools to work for everyone, every pupil must have the opportunity to flourish academically - irrespective of background. As directors of academy trusts, you are integral to ensuring this is the case.

According to the Sutton Trust report, pupils in schools which enthusiastically embraced the EBacc:

- were more likely to achieve good GCSEs in English and maths
- achieve higher average grades across the board
- are 1.7 percentage points more likely to be taking an A level or other level 3 qualification after the age of 16
- and they are 1.8 percentage points less likely to drop out of education entirely

In spite of this evidence, the report found that many headteachers believe this academic curriculum is not appropriate for some pupils. It is the job of strong board members to challenge these misconceptions.

Unfortunately, there are 1.25 million children attending schools which are rated as inadequate or require improvement. Just over a week ago, the Prime Minister launched a [government consultation document](#) designed to turbo-charge social mobility in this country.

The proposals in the consultation document complement our wider approach to school improvement and in particular the academies programme. Our proposals will result in more universities and independent schools sponsoring academies and setting up free schools. Equally, we are asking how some existing non-selective schools, including academies, could become selective - if they wish. The consultation also proposes entirely new selective schools being established as free schools, to widen choice, to bring more flexibility, and to challenge those areas of the country where too few pupils are entered for the EBacc combination of core academic GCSEs.

Naturally, change means a period of adaptation. You will have a vital job in steering your trusts and schools through these changes.

In some cases, your trust may find itself collaborating far more closely than before with universities and the independent sector. The success of King's College London Maths School - which reported 83% of its pupils achieving an A* in maths A level this year - is testament to the collaboration possible. Harris Westminster Sixth Form, just a short walk from here, announced that it is sending 7 pupils to Oxbridge this year.

Some of the schools in your trust may well introduce selection by ability. Your trust may consider establishing a new selective free school or you may look to expand using the routes that are already available.

The consultation will also look at how we might encourage multi-academy trusts to establish single centres in which to educate the most able pupils. As pupils are identified as the most able after they have been admitted to their individual school, through a non-selective admissions process, this is something that is already permissible for multi-academy trusts.

Whatever direction your trust takes, your role on the board will remain the same: promoting conditions that allow teachers to teach and pupils to learn.

James Coleman, the American sociologist of education, concluded that the school characteristic which had the greatest impact on education outcomes was 'intensity'. The hallmark of schools which achieved both high achievement and equity was a relentless and goal-orientated focus on core academic education. Directors and board members play a vital role in demanding this intense focus on academic outcomes.

Analysing Coleman's research, ED Hirsch - the educationist who has had the most profound impact on my thinking about education - notes that it is no surprise that this intensity raises attainment. It also increases equity.

In his seminal book, 'The Knowledge Deficit', E D Hirsch argues that disadvantaged pupils learn proportionately more in a lesson than their more advantaged peers. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, he argues, are less exposed to core academic knowledge at home. In a lesson about the lifecycle of plants, pupils from advantaged homes may be revisiting knowledge taught to them by their parents. Therefore, he argues, in classrooms intensively teaching a core knowledge curriculum all children learn more - but pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds learn the most.

"In a productive classroom" - he writes - "disadvantaged pupils are getting proportionally more out of school without holding back advantaged ones. On the other hand, if the school is an unproductive one, it will have a greater negative impact on disadvantaged than on advantaged pupils."

Andrew Adonis - pioneer of the academies movement - wrote in his reflections on his work in education about the failings of school governance and the need for academies. And I quote:

" Fatally, the comprehensive principle became confused with dogmatic attachment to a bureaucratic model of school governance which institutionalised weak and unambitious

school leadership. Comprehensives failed on governance. The demarcation between local education authorities and school governing bodies was chronically unclear. Headteachers had 2 masters and only partial managerial control of their own schools. Buck passing was rife and diversity stifled.”

This is no longer the picture of school leadership in this country. Diversity has been encouraged; academy trust boards have greater autonomy than ever before to empower headteachers. Boards are able to recruit a diverse group of talented trustees to ensure that leadership is ambitious and has the highest expectations of every child.

Thank you for everything you have done, and will continue to do, to improve our education system. Together we will build an education system that works for everyone.

Thank you very much.

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