

## Speech

# Sir Michael Wilshaw's speech at the Education Policy Institute conference

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)

Delivered on: 25 November 2016 (Transcript of the speech, exactly as it was delivered)

First published: 25 November 2016

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke at the Education Policy Institute conference and reflects on the past 5 years.



Thank you for that introduction David and thank you for inviting me to your conference today.

As I approach the final few weeks of my term as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, I have naturally found myself in a more than usually reflective frame of mind. It has certainly been a tumultuous 5 years – occasionally turbulent, sometimes exhilarating but never, ever dull.

I have said many times that the reason I took this job in the first place was because Ofsted had been fundamental to my work as a headteacher to drive up standards. Without Ofsted, I wouldn't have been as successful in tackling deep-seated problems and entrenched attitudes in the schools that I led in London. Inspection is a powerful lever for improvement. Talk to any decent headteacher and they would tell you the same.

That is why any move away from routine, independent inspection and a judgement-based model, in my view, risks jeopardising the higher standards that we have all striven so hard to achieve.

Every headteacher I have ever met wants to know whether their school is good or not. Every parent I have ever met wants to know whether their child is likely to get a good education at their school or not. Neither are interested in a woolly narrative – both want certainty and clarity about how the school is doing.

That is why our judgements have to be secure and based on strong evidence. You have questioned the security of some of our judgements in your recent report. I absolutely accept that Ofsted should be as open to scrutiny as the providers we inspect – indeed, even more so. But I have to say that I take issue with many of your conclusions. I believe that the basic premise of your report is flawed. So let me explain why.

First, and most importantly, you have looked at data and inspection judgements over a 9-year period, all the way back to 2005. Over that period, there have been 5 Chief Inspectors, 4 Prime Ministers, 3 administrations and a variety of inspection frameworks reflecting not only government and Ofsted priorities but also the rising expectations of the nation. Your report does not compare like with like.

The main problem is that in covering such a long period, the report fails to take account of important legislative changes and the numerous amendments by successive governments to measurements of attainment and progress.

In particular, it masks the impact of the decision I took early in my tenure to shift our emphasis from pupil attainment to pupil progress. Our data, which we monitor regularly, shows that the expectation for progress now placed on schools in disadvantaged areas is virtually identical to those in the most affluent areas.

Let me restate that last sentence because it is important. Our data from the last few years of inspection shows that the expectation for progress now placed on schools in disadvantaged areas is virtually identical to those in the most affluent areas.

It becomes even more misleading when we remember that the government took the decision to exempt outstanding schools from routine inspection. As a result, there remain a stock of schools that have not been inspected for many years.

These schools will have been last inspected under one of the previous inspection frameworks that placed greater emphasis on attainment than the current framework does. If we were able to routinely inspect these schools today, it is entirely possible that, with the greater emphasis in the current inspection framework on progress, we would find some of these schools to be good rather than outstanding.

But the coalition government, when they passed this legislation, only wanted Ofsted to return to outstanding schools when we saw a significant decline in their performance.

This brings me to my other concern about the report, when it suggests that Ofsted does not always re-inspect quickly enough schools that decline and that when we do go back to these schools, our judgements should be harsher.

The author managed to find 34 outstanding primary schools and just 3 outstanding secondary schools that had deteriorated according to the EPI measure but that haven't been re-inspected.

I admit that in an ideal world, I would like to have seen these schools inspected. However, the fact that these represent 1.1% of outstanding primary schools and 0.4% of outstanding secondary schools, means I am not convinced that inspecting them to find they may have dropped to good is necessarily the best use of our diminishing resources.

And should we be harsher when we return? While the EPI's single value-added measure suggests we should be, I have tried to encourage my inspectors to use their professional judgement. Inspection, after all, is not painting by numbers.

It would be easy enough to set up what might be considered an entirely consistent evaluation system, based purely on published data. We could do that on a laptop plugged into the Whitehall intranet and save nearly £40 million per year.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't be any good for the hundreds of schools with small cohorts of children for whom the data is at best inconclusive and, at worst, often meaningless in terms of wider comparison.

It wouldn't identify when an excellent new leadership team was starting to turn things round, but this was not yet reflected in published outcomes.

It wouldn't tell us about the culture and ethos for learning or about the efforts being made to provide a truly broad and balanced curriculum for pupils.

It also wouldn't tell us when schools were providing a low-tariff, dumbed-down curriculum that was failing to stretch the most able.

And it certainly wouldn't tell us where there was significant low-level disruption in the school or when children were being exposed to bullying or were at risk from radicalisation or other forms of abuse.

Finally, before I move on from the report, I should make clear that even under our current inspection framework, with its greater emphasis on progress, we still won't judge a school to be outstanding unless the pupils are making both 'high' progress from their starting points and attaining results that are 'broadly in line with national averages' or, if below national averages, are 'improving rapidly'.

Let me emphasise this point: if these broad criteria are not met, a school can still be judged good but not outstanding. This was a deliberate decision that we took when drawing up the current framework.

Why did we take this decision? We took it because we should never try to make excuses for schools, even those in challenging circumstances. As an inner-London headteacher, I would have felt frankly insulted if I thought Ofsted was somehow going easy on the schools I led simply because many of the kids came from difficult homes. I wanted us to be judged on equal terms with the very best comprehensive schools in the country – schools, and there are many of them now, that were attaining highly against the national benchmark, regardless of catchment area.

After all, I knew that once they'd left school, my pupils would have to compete for jobs with young people from all backgrounds. I understood that employers were unlikely to make much allowance for their upbringing when considering their GCSE results, so neither should I.

The same holds true today. It is not Ofsted's job to artificially lower the bar. Doing so would damage, not improve, social mobility. We would also be doing a grave disservice to those many headteachers right across the country who are showing what can be done in areas of significant social and economic disadvantage.

People like Kevin Blakey of East Point Academy in Lowestoft, Nadine Carroll of Whitefield Primary School in Liverpool, Barbara Conroy of Queenborough School on the Isle of Sheppey, Dawn Parkinson of Beaumont Leys School in Leicester and Mark Hassack of Outwood Academy Acklam in Middlesbrough.

Neither am I prepared to let the government off the hook for failing to heed the recommendation I made in my 'Access and achievement' report 4 years ago that we need many more good leaders and teachers – and we need to direct them to the places where they are needed most.

Having said all this about your report, I am very clear that it is the job of every Chief Inspector to ensure that inspection is credible and robust, particularly when challenging the system to do better.

That is why I have devoted so much time and energy over my tenure to pushing through important reforms to inspection and creating a tighter, leaner, more finely tuned organisation.

So let me remind you of what we have done during the 5 years I have been Chief Inspector.

We have established clear lines of accountability through a new regional structure. Eight Ofsted regional directors working with national remit directors are now responsible for SHMI, HMI, regulatory inspectors and Ofsted Inspectors across each remit and in each region. This has brought a new coherence to Ofsted and helped to gather and disseminate intelligence on what is working and not working in each part of the country.

We have improved the quality and consistency of inspection by:

- bringing all inspection in-house and doing away with the third-party commercial contractors
- overhauling our training of inspectors, both centrally and within the regions
- introducing rigorous quality assurance arrangements
- ensuring many more HMI-led inspections and bringing many more serving leaders on to inspection teams
- ending the use of inspectors without teaching experience – originally a requirement by government when Ofsted was set up
- creating external scrutiny panels containing good and outstanding leaders from the sectors to make the final ruling on complaints

We have also simplified our inspection frameworks and handbooks, and adapted them to accommodate my priorities and those of government and the nation. Hence the increased focus on the most able, the most disadvantaged children, British values, the relevance of the further education curriculum, the journey of the vulnerable child from identification into care and so on.

We have introduced a more proportionate inspection model for good schools in order to focus more sharply on those schools that are struggling.

We have ensured that the leadership judgement is now the first, rather than the last, judgement on every report because we all know that everything flows from good leadership.

We have reduced bureaucracy and worked hard to dispel the myths about what Ofsted expects. For example:

- we do not have a preferred style of teaching and we certainly don't mark down formal, structured, 'traditional' teaching; we are much more interested in the impact of teaching on progress and outcomes
- we no longer grade individual lessons but do expect headteachers to have an accurate knowledge of what is happening in the classroom
- we don't insist on seeing mountains of paperwork, but we do want to see lessons that are well structured and planned and where children are focused on their learning
- finally, we have ensured that our reports are clear, concise and easy to read – particularly for parents; compare for yourself our reports now, particularly the letters to parents following the inspection of good schools, to those of yesteryear

It is worth remembering that we have been able to do all this against a backdrop of rapidly shrinking resources.

Making these important changes has enabled me to do full justice to the 2 important functions of the Chief Inspector.

First, to challenge the system.

There is no question in my mind that the system as a whole has responded positively to our tougher

frameworks.

My decision early on to scrap the satisfactory grade and replace it with requires improvement was undoubtedly challenging and greeted with a great deal of sound and fury at the time. But it was unquestionably the right step to take because it has ramped up expectations and galvanised many schools to do significantly better.

The figures speak for themselves. At the point when we brought in the new grade in September 2012, there were 4,800 primary schools that were judged to be satisfactory. Many had been content to coast along carrying the satisfactory label year after year, inspection after inspection. Today, 77% of those schools have improved to good or outstanding. There were 933 satisfactory secondary schools 4 years ago. Today, 56% of them are now good or outstanding.

And remember, this improving picture has disproportionately helped children in the most deprived areas. Challenge has also meant shining a spotlight on underperforming areas of the country in a way that had never really been done before. As a result of doing so, we are seeing signs of real progress being made in places like Norfolk, Coventry and Middlesbrough and many others where Ofsted has previously publicly identified low school standards.

The second function of the Chief Inspector is to provide a running commentary on standards. I hope people will say that I have done a reasonable job of raising awareness of some of the major educational challenges still facing us as a nation.

It is certainly the case that I have made it a key mission of mine to regularly highlight the problems that, to my mind, are still holding us back and require urgent attention. Let me remind you of some of these issues:

- the growing North–South divide that exists after the age of 11
- the plight of our poorer children from White British backgrounds and in our coastal and post-industrial communities
- the failure to tackle low level disruption in the classroom
- problems with the teaching and curriculum at key stage 3
- the fact that the most able disadvantaged children in our non-selective schools are still not doing as well as they should
- the poor quality of careers guidance and the parlous state of our post-16 technical and vocational provision

I'm aware that in bringing these issues and many others to public attention, I have been accused of being abrasive and rather too forthright at times. I prefer to regard it as plain-speaking and telling it as I see it on the basis of the evidence presented to me. I hope, at least, that people understand that I have been motivated by a passionate desire to improve the lives of children and young people, particularly the poor.

It has been a privilege to serve as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector and to have had the opportunity to play such a key part in raising standards. And, although there is still a long way to go, our schools have improved immeasurably and continue to improve.

I am also pleased that Ofsted itself, as the country's most important regulator, has changed and adapted to meet higher expectations and greater demands over the past 5 years.

Of course, we don't always get it right in the thousands of inspections we carry out each year. But I hope that we will always be big enough to acknowledge our mistakes, and to learn from them. I have certainly learned from mine and endeavoured to change inspection and my leadership of it when I've got it wrong.

What I won't do, and have never done, is to compromise on the rigour of inspection and the high expectations that underpin all our frameworks.

We should never forget that Ofsted's primary purpose will always be to champion the right of every child to a decent education. We know that parents rely on our findings for reassurance and to help them make choices about where to send their children.

Thank you for listening.

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Published:

**25 November 2016**

From:

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**Sir Michael Wilshaw**

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