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News story

Lord Agnew speech at the Festival of Education

Lord Agnew spoke at the Festival of Education at Wellington College on 20 July 2019

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Lord Agnew

Lord Agnew spoke to attendees at the Festival of Education at Wellington College on 20 July, 2019. He delivered the following speech on behalf of Education Secretary Damian Hinds who was unable to attend.

It's great to be here at Wellington College and also to be the warmup act for Amanda, our HMCT. I want to thank you Amanda for the important work that you and Ofsted do. For your personal commitment to educational rigour.

I know you've already heard from some excellent speakers today and that this festival is always a fantastic opportunity to debate the big ideas when it comes to education.

It's a privilege to be surrounded by those who share a passion for this subject. Events like this are essential in bring together the big thinkers in our education system.

At times like this, with so much uncertainty in the air it's important that we all take the time to reflect on where we are going.

By its nature, education is about the long term. At its heart, the work that all of you do is about shaping the minds of the next generation. A great education is fundamental to success – the individual success of all those who study, whatever their age and success for our country.

A great education system can, and should, be geared towards tackling the big, long term challenges our country faces.

One of these great, generational challenges is productivity. It's not an abstract concept. We should care about productivity because it decides not just the size of our economy but our quality of life. Higher productivity means more fulfilling, higher paying jobs. It means new investment, leading to greater prosperity.

Productivity matters because it's about people being able to fulfil their potential. Economically, we can't afford to waste the talents of young people held back by the circumstances of their birth. This is why social mobility has always been critical to my vision for education and inseparable from the goal of raising productivity.

But when it comes to productivity, we lag behind. Badly. Our key competitors such as Germany, France and the US – all produce over 25% more per hour than the UK. This didn't happen overnight. The productivity gap with our European competitors opened up in late 1960s, and earlier still the US.

Just as the gap has been around for some time, the gap won't be closed unless we take the long term view. To fix Britain's productivity we need a major upgrade in the nation's skills. That should start with an honest assessment of where we are.

Across the UK as a whole we have a large number of people who either never progressed beyond GCSEs or gained low level vocational qualifications. 65% of our working population have completed upper secondary education (that's Level 3). When you consider that the equivalent in Germany is 87%, its clear we have our work cut out.

The answer lies in our schools and our colleges. As part of the review of the national curriculum which began in 2011, we benchmarked our

curriculum against those of high performing jurisdictions and found that they set higher expectations without compromising curriculum breadth.

We reformed the national curriculum in 2014, and then GCSEs qualifications, so that we set world-class standards across all subjects. We've removed hundreds of pointless and unproductive qualifications.

When you look at how productivity differs between places in the UK, the picture is stark.

According to the CBI the most productive area of the country is almost three times more productive than the least. Educational attainment is the single most important driver of those differences.

Of course the gap between Britain and Germany, or between one region of the UK and another, isn't a reflection of the innate talents of our young people.

Instead it's a challenge to us all to ensure that our system is delivering the opportunities for education and training across the whole country.

We have made progress. The industrial strategy sets out a plan to invest in the three engines of productivity - individuals, innovation and infrastructure. Through our Opportunity Areas programme we're investing £72m in some of the places with the biggest challenges, to make sure our efforts are focused on eliminating the productivity gap between different parts of the country.

In order to transform Britain's productivity and set our young people up for the future, the goal of building a world class education system drives everything we aim to do at the DfE.

This is why we've focused on school autonomy and trusted leaders to run their schools, because that's how you raise standards

It's why we've focused on teacher retention. This includes our Recruitment and Retention Strategy. This provides a commitment to develop world class training and development together with strong career pathways.

It's why we are committed to reducing the workload of teachers and supporting school leaders to create the right culture in their schools.

We know that more schools are taking action to tackle workload. We have seen over 150,000 collective downloads of our workload reduction toolkit in less than 18 months.

We are working with Ofsted to simplify the accountability system. The new Ofsted framework will have an active focus on reducing teacher workload.

An education system can only ever be as good as its teachers and its leaders. We are very lucky to have some of the very best. They, indeed you, are the fulcrum of the system

We have been rigorous about the curriculum so that young people are prepared for adult life; reforming GCSEs and introducing the EBacc. We will continue to pursue the manifesto target of 75% EBacc entry at GCSEs.

These are subjects which form part of the compulsory curriculum in many of the highest performing countries internationally, at least up to 15 or 16.

We have focused relentlessly on social mobility and disadvantage. Narrowing the gap between children from well off families and their less well-off peers so that every young person has the opportunity to make the most of their talents.

We have made progress. I could stand in front of you and reel off more statistics on how far we've come. But I want, instead, to talk about where I think we need to go from here. Not in the short term but the long term, so we can confidently continue to build the world class education system our country needs.

To do that we must be ambitious for the future of our schools and colleges, not just for the next year but for the next generation.

That requires a vision for how we continue to raise school standards. How we ensure that we have the very best teachers for our children and how we will fix technical education. We owe it to the next generation to confront the big choices, not to duck them.

Yes it's true that we live in a time of uncertainty, at home and abroad, but that uncertainty makes it more urgent, not less.

I want to reassert our long-term vision for an education system that achieves these goals, and the challenges we must overcome in order to get there.

Part of the reason we've made such progress since 2010 is that we know what works: school autonomy, great teachers, and a rigorous curriculum.

That is why we want to see us finishing the reforms we began in 2010. That means continuing to be ambitious about academisation by growing the best trusts, where teachers and leaders are already making an extraordinary difference to the lives of children. We must do that in the parts of the country where the need for those teachers and leaders is greatest.

Our ambition remains for all schools to be academies, working in partnerships in great school trusts. This year we hit the milestone of 50% of pupils taught in academies.

Looking to the long term; 10 years from now, we want to see the vast majority of schools becoming academies and joining strong academy chains.

To achieve this we will build on the experience of previous capacity funds for academy trusts. We will shortly be announcing a fund that will boost the growth of our strongest academy trusts allowing them to support a greater number of schools across the country.

The fund will increase the capacity of academy trusts to grow partnerships that support the development of teachers and leaders and the education of children. We have learnt from earlier growth funds what works best and we intend to build on this.

The fund will support smaller school trusts that wish to merge into existing or new academy groups, and providing high-potential academy trusts with funding to meet the challenges they face as they grow.

Local authorities have an important role to play and we are committed to working with them to consider how this will evolve as we move towards the vast majority of schools becoming academies.

This will include exploring how they might support the growth of academy trusts in their areas. As we think about the future, we must take a long-term view of how to attract more high calibre teachers into the profession.

We won't get the teachers we need unless we focus on creating the right conditions for them to excel. There is clearly a strong case to explore reform of teacher pay to ensure that the money schools spend on pay is targeted where it will have the biggest impact on recruitment and retention.

We must be bold about the offer that we make to new teachers. We recently announced the Early Career Framework – in itself the most significant reform to teaching since it became a graduate profession.

We will build on this by introducing a new, rigorous core content framework for Initial Teacher Training to align with the Early Career Framework.

Taken together, this will create an entitlement for new teachers to 3 years of structured training and development, backed by the best available research.

In doing so we aim to ensure that people enter teaching in a manner that

reflects its position as one of the most important professions in our society.

Alongside this we will deliver the other commitments in the Recruitment and Retention strategy, including the expansion of flexible working and more diverse career pathways.

We know that our economy has evolved in its ability to accommodate flexible working and we need to help the schools system do more to support teachers who want this.

We must be relentless in ensuring that our reforms are always improving the odds for young people. Where you end up in life shouldn't be determined by where you start, and yet many disadvantaged young people lose out by not having a parent or guardian who is 'in the know' about what to study.

Central to a world class system in the long term is ensuring that children are setting themselves up for success with their subject choices, which is why EBacc is so important.

Participation in creative subjects such as music and the arts is vital, particularly up to Key Stage 3. The DfE is committed to supporting both participation and progression – most notably in music.

Alongside this it is vital that we ensure that pupils are encouraged to study the core academic subjects at GCSE – English, maths, science (including computing), foreign languages, history and geography.

Schools previously entered many more pupils in these subjects. In 2000, three quarters [76%] of pupils entered a language GCSE. By 2011, however, the proportion of pupils entering science, a foreign language and geography GCSEs had fallen to less than a quarter.

These subjects are essential if young people are to succeed in the knowledge economy, particularly if they are considering a good university. They are also at the heart of a well-rounded education.

Since our reforms began in 2010 we have seen entry levels for science increase dramatically from 63% in 2010 to 95% in 2018.

The proportion of those taking history or geography has increased from 48% to 78%. The proportion of pupils taking the EBacc combination of subjects as a whole increased to 38% in 2018. But we need to go much further.

In particular, we want to focus on languages. While we have seen a rise in the number of pupils taking at least one language from 40% in 2010 to 46%, there remains much more to do.

It is vital that children should be given the opportunity to learn languages

to prepare them for a world that is more connected than ever. It's why almost three-quarters of parents and carers [73%] said they would advise their child to take a foreign language GCSE.

As part of a long term approach to education we will keep up the focus on language curriculum programmes and continue to recruit and train more MFL teachers.

We would like to work with schools to do more to strengthen opportunities for more children to learn a foreign language.

Our Free School programme has led the way in deploying a rigorous knowledge rich curriculum with over 400 now open and many more in the pipeline.

We all know that digital skills will become increasingly critical, whatever career path a young person chooses. That is why we reformed the computer science GCSE, with input from leading industry experts, to equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they will need for the high-tech jobs of the future.

Computer science will become an essential skill in the digital era and already leads to a wide range of careers. We want to see more pupils, including girls, follow this path.

To support this, we launched the National Centre for Computing Education (NCCE) in November 2018, backed by £84 million of government funding to ensure pupils are better prepared for further study and employment in digital roles.

To deliver on these promises, schools and colleges need to have the resources to support the development of healthy, happy children.

From my conversations with heads and colleges principals – I have heard first-hand about the pressures you face.

You will have heard the Secretary of State promise that he would back teachers to have the resources they need and would make the strongest possible case for investment in our schools and colleges. The Secretary of State has asked me to make that commitment to you again today.

It must be right that in a world class education system, there can be no people or places left behind. We must look again at how we can be bolder in supporting the schools facing some of the greatest challenges, in our plans to help schools tackle behaviour and attendance and for the future of our successful Opportunity Areas programme.

As the Secretary of State set out in his speech on Monday, in all our reforms we must bring to bear a new focus on Children in Need and recognise the changing face of disadvantage.

Alongside this, we must find ways to work with heads and principals to support schools in making every pound count in the classroom.

There are many lessons to take from the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. But a clear lesson is that we must turn our attention to making all parts of the country engines of productivity and places where there are plenty of high quality, well paid jobs.

The most productive parts of the country benefit from a virtuous circle, where strong schools with great teachers lead to strong skills with investment following behind as the skilled workforce is in place.

That is why - to create that virtuous circle everywhere – we want to do more to incentivise the best teachers and leaders to work in parts of the country and the schools where they are most needed. We want the best Trusts to expand into areas that some would describe as being “left behind”.

But we have no chance of providing the next generation with the skills to succeed if we do not get serious about investing in technical education.

Which is why we will continue to pursue the reforms of technical education, including the delivery of T-levels and the NRS, which have already been announced.

Colleges are the critical infrastructure of the Industrial Strategy. Last month the Prime Minister was right to say that we have fallen behind our competitor nations when it comes to technical education as successive government have failed to give FE colleges the support they need.

The Post 18 review argued compellingly for much greater investment in further education – both talented teachers and the essential infrastructure, such as buildings and equipment, that underpins the sector. Working in partnership

We are clear on where we want the schools system to go, but we plan to listen to your advice on how to get there.

We want to work with teachers, governors and school and college leaders to turn this vision into reality, just as we worked with you to produce our teacher R&R strategy

Now is the time to think big, not small. Long-term not short term. To ensure that we can fix the generational challenge of productivity and that our world class education system continues to improve and be available to all children.

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