

National Governors' Association conference



Strong governance: learning from the best

16 June 2012

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Ofsted

Thank you for the invitation. It is a real pleasure to be here with a group of people who have such a key part to play in improving our education system.

And who are giving up their Saturday.

I want to talk about the contribution governing bodies can make to better outcomes for children and young people. I will set this in the context of our changes to school inspection.

In my short time in the post I seem to have picked up something of a reputation and I am actually quite a nice man.

I promise you that not everything that's been written about me is true!

I'm a real believer in the nobility of teaching and the power of schools to change lives, particularly for those who need it most. It's motivated me to do what I've done in inner-city schools and to take this job as Chief Inspector.

I am optimistic about what we can do if we learn from our best teachers, headteachers and governors – those who are never satisfied until their schools are as good as they can be.

Together, I hope we can do much more to close gaps in standards for pupils from different backgrounds.

I also know that this is your mission as governors as well.

I started teaching in 1968 – the year of revolution – but I can tell you there wasn't much of a revolution in standards in English schools at that time. If there was, I didn't detect it.

Much of my early career was spent in inner London schools, and, frankly, they reflected the dire nature of the world around them.

Those of us who experienced the 70s and 80s know how generations of children and young people could be failed by a combination of rigid ideology, ineffective teaching and sheer bloody-mindedness. I still bear the scars of those days.

Hackney Downs, the predecessor school to Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, where I was head before joining Ofsted, was a good example of this and represented the worst excesses of the time – but there were many others who got away quite honestly with blue murder.

We really have moved on light years since then. The environment, including school funding and teacher recruitment, is now a great deal more supportive than it was in those days.

There is far greater political and public will to make a real difference.

There is much more of a consensus on the way forward for our schools – more autonomy, more resources to the front line, stronger school partnerships, all matched by greater levels of accountability.

So, where are standards now? Yes, of course they have risen. Standards are good for many children and young people, particularly if they live in the right area or postcode – or, of course, if their parents can afford to pay for education. But standards are still not good enough for far too many and the gap is still far too wide between the poor and the prosperous.

A third of all pupils leave primary school without being able to read, write and do maths well, rising to more than 40% of the most deprived pupils.

Despite improvements in secondary schools, a quarter of a million children don't achieve the GCSE benchmark. Of children on free school meals, this rises to two thirds.

Far too many young adults lack the skills to make their way in the modern world. It really is quite shocking that in our developed society, one in seven – 6 million adults – lacks the literacy skills needed to cope in life. So we do need to worry that many other countries are outperforming England in the PISA league tables in English, maths and science.

We need to worry that the UK still lags behind in persuading young people to stay on in education or training after 16. Indeed, the OECD has shown that almost all other developed countries have more young people staying on in education, both after 16 and after 20.

We need to worry that almost half of young people under the age of 30 who don't have level 2 qualifications are unemployed. This situation has deteriorated faster in England than our international competitors. As a result, we know that these young people are likely to face a lifetime of poverty and unemployment.

We need to do much better if more young people are to have the opportunities and benefits that a good education brings.

That said, I'm more confident now than ever that we can make headway. There are three main reasons for my optimism.

Firstly, we have a higher calibre of teachers entering the classroom. Teaching is seen much more as a career of choice and has much higher status than in those dreadful days I've mentioned. And initiatives such as Teach First have made a real difference.

Secondly, we've got a growing number of outstanding headteachers who are not only doing an excellent job in their own schools but are also supporting other schools through clusters and federations. These leaders are playing a key part in mentoring and supporting younger heads.

And thirdly, strong governance is increasingly transforming schools and building effective partnerships.

At the last count there were more than 300,000 school governors in England. That's more than turn out each week to watch the football at all the Premier League grounds in London and Manchester.

You form one of the largest volunteer groups in the country. In effect, you are the Big Society in action.

Over the past 25 years or so, since the introduction of local management of schools, governors have had more autonomy and more responsibilities. We have increasingly come to rely on governors simply because the power and influence of local authorities has steadily demised.

So what exactly do we now want from governors?

My answer is that we want them to govern.

In essence, what does this mean?

It means that we want you to work with the leaders of your schools to be both strategic and pragmatic in delivering good outcomes for all your children and young people. Not satisfactory, but good.

We want you to strengthen your schools' professional leadership by appointing the right people to the right jobs.

And we want you to hold them to account for the progress and outcomes they achieve in your schools.

It sounds simple, but you know how hard that can be. But without strong and effective governance, our schools simply won't be as good as they can be.

Your role is fundamental and you should never forget that.

I took on this job because I believe school inspection can play an important role in promoting achievement.

I want inspection to help school leaders, both heads and governors, to challenge the education service to do better. I want to provide a strong system of accountability that supports ambitious heads and governors to do what is necessary to improve their schools.

That is why we are making the radical changes to the inspection system that will take effect from September.

Our priority is to ensure that every pupil has a good education, regardless of which school they attend. Good will be the only acceptable form of provision.

We also have to ensure that our resources within a constrained financial environment are put to the best possible use.

Sometimes consultations simply go through the motions. Not this time. We have kept to our key proposals but have made changes to their implementation in response to the consultation.

So, this is what we've decided.

The first change is about a new grade of 'requires improvement' to replace the satisfactory grade. Satisfactory should never be more than a staging post on a school's journey towards providing a good or outstanding education for all children.

There will be a full inspection of schools judged to require improvement two years later. Schools that are not judged good or better at their third inspection are very likely to be placed in special measures as they will have shown a lack of capacity to improve.

But we're not in the business of catching schools out retrospectively. So, schools rated satisfactory at the end of August 2012 will have a clean slate before being inspected by the end of the academic year 2013/14. However, those schools already with a notice to improve will only have one more chance.

The second main reform from September is that to be judged outstanding, a school must have outstanding teaching. If teaching is the single most important factor in a school's success, this is only right. Not every lesson has to be outstanding, but, over time, schools must show that outstanding teaching overall is helping pupils to achieve rapid and sustained progress.

I am clear that outstanding teaching is not a matter of following a formula. Excellent teachers have a passion for their subject. They engage and energise children and make sure they really learn. There are different ways of doing this. Inspectors do not have a preconceived view of what excellent teaching looks like.

The judgement on the quality of teaching will be based on the quality of learning and the progress that children are making.

The third change is about the notice of an inspection.

We have listened to concerns about completely unannounced inspections. Good heads and governors aren't worried about inspectors seeing their schools as they really are. In fact, often they welcome it.

They understand we aren't trying to catch them out.

We simply don't want the stress that can be caused when there is too much of a build up to an inspection. And I have seen that stress in my own time as a teacher and as a head.

However, I can understand that heads and governors want to be in the school from the start of the inspection.

That's why from September, we will call schools the afternoon before the inspection. Not no notice, but shorter notice.

Finally, to make sure that Ofsted inspections contribute directly to school improvement, there will now be more emphasis on classroom observation to get to the heart of the school's work. There will also be a deeper dialogue between inspectors and school leaders after an inspection.

So that's where we stand now on inspection. What do these changes mean for governors?

Your work as governors – as well as that of your school's leadership team – will be assessed against the four key judgements in the new framework: achievement, the quality of teaching, behaviour and safety, and leadership and management.

We considered having a separate grade for governance but concluded that it was better to have a single, integrated judgement of the school's overall leadership and management. But inspectors will comment on the strengths and weaknesses in the governing body's work and identify any key areas for improvement.

We are taking our inspection of governance very seriously. It will feature prominently in the new inspection handbook and training for inspectors on this issue will take place in July.

The evaluation criteria incorporate the five core functions set out in the recent National College recommendation on good governance – work to which I know the NGA contributed.

So the evaluation will focus on how governors ensure the school has a clear strategic direction.

It will examine how governors support and challenge school leaders and hold them to account for the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement, behaviour and safety. It will also cover the management of finances, including the use of the pupil premium to overcome barriers to learning.

As now, inspectors will expect to meet governors during the inspection, as well as feeding back to them about their conclusions.

There is no significant change to what happens after an inspection: we will continue to expect governors to work with the school's staff to tackle any issues identified by inspectors.

But the substance of the changes we are making to inspections requires schools to move more quickly to address serious shortcomings.

So where a school both requires improvement and also has weak leadership and management, inspectors may recommend that there should be an external review of governance arrangements.

When a school needs special measures, a monitoring inspection will take place within two months.

If the governing body has not produced an effective action plan the inspector may recommend that an interim executive board (an IEB) is set up quickly. Subsequent monitoring inspections will evaluate the progress made by the governing body or the IEB.

Last year, Ofsted published a report called *School governance: learning from the best*. It described good governance in a wide variety of different schools across the country. Its findings are even more important with the growth of autonomous schools and academies – and the greater demands being placed on governing bodies.

The case studies illustrate the commitment of governors and how they strive to achieve the very best for the pupils and communities they serve.

As the examples show, governors have their greatest impact when they pose challenging questions and test new proposals rigorously on the basis of good evidence, including their own direct experience of how the school operates.

Heads need to provide governors with good information so that they can ask the right questions.

Governors also need to ensure that the best staff are appointed and retained and that they support the head in robust performance management. Inspectors will focus much more on the robustness of performance management in a school and judge whether there is a direct correlation between the quality of teaching and salary progression. They will ask to see reports to the governing board on this and anonymised data on salary.

Governors also need to keep up to date with their own training and development. It is particularly important that heads and academy principals find ways to ensure this happens when local authorities may be cutting such training because of financial constraints.

The report includes a set of questions to help governors reflect on the work they do.

One is: What do we know about the achievement of pupils and the quality of teaching in the school?

That's the key question for me because it bears on the two central issues in the leadership of teaching: the assessment of pupil progress and the performance management of staff. In my view this question is the best gauge of the governing body's relationship with the head.

Some governors would prefer to focus on familiar territory and easier issues – school meals, uniform, the plumbing in the loos. These should not be your main priorities.

The quality of teaching is the single most important factor in the quality of the school. It is your job to know how good it is and where the weaknesses lie.

If there were any doubts about this, let me quote you one key sentence from a recent Sutton Trust report:

'For poor pupils, the difference between a good teacher and a bad one is a whole year's learning.'

So rather than lunches and loos, your main focus should be on the quality of teaching in the school, the leadership of teaching and learning, the progress and outcomes for pupils and the performance management of staff, including the headteacher.

You all know that if these things go well, the culture of the school will also be good and it is very likely that your school will get a good inspection judgement.

But what about schools where governance is not good? What can be done to improve performance?

You must make sure that your energies are focused on the most important issues – and not on those that are peripheral to the progress and achievement of pupils.

In the last full year of inspections, governance was only satisfactory (or occasionally worse) in nearly 40% of the schools inspected. This figure hadn't shifted much from five years before.

Across the country, the judgement on leadership and management overall was more favourable than the separate judgment on governance. In other words, the quality of governance trailed behind the quality of the professional leadership of the school.

These statistics are particularly worrying because of the importance of governance in an increasingly autonomous school system.

Failing schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas, often fail because governance is weak.

Too many satisfactory schools have mediocre governance.

Some previously good or outstanding schools decline because governors have taken their eyes off the ball.

So what can we do about this? Well, it would help if we attempted to address the following questions, which are thrown up in innumerable Ofsted reports:

First: how do we enable more governing bodies to focus on strategic issues?

The new Ofsted evaluation criteria should help, but Chairs of Governors, working with their heads, need to provide the governing body with the right information to focus on what matters.

Second: are governing bodies too unwieldy?

As you know, from September the regulations allow smaller governing bodies than before and encourage you to appoint people with the right skills.

Is there a danger that stakeholder representation leads to a lack of focus, where you become more of a talking shop than a decision-making board? Is there a danger also that the wrong representation can hold the school back?

Third: how do we establish a more professional approach to governance, particularly in the schools that need it most?

A careful balance has to be struck between holding the head to account and getting too closely involved in the school's day-to-day management. Too much interference can be as bad as too little intervention.

I am very well aware that it can be particularly difficult to build effective governance in deprived neighbourhoods of the country. Governors with the right skills can be very hard to find.

Interim executive boards can be set up when schools fail and we know that they can make a rapid difference – provided that they are set up quickly and have members with the appropriate skills.

Of course, it would be far better to get the people with the right skills in from the start, particularly when schools decline.

So it will be interesting to see if the new National Leaders of Governance – promoted by the National College – will help struggling governing bodies to improve their performance.

In the same way that good heads support other schools in trouble, good governors could provide similar support to weaker governing bodies. Remember, local authorities still retain the power to appoint additional governors when a school is declining. If these governors have to be paid for their time, then so be it.

Finally, should there be a stronger push to set up governing bodies which are responsible for a group of schools?

Well focused, high calibre governance in some academy chains has brought about radical improvement. The same principle could apply to groups of small primary schools where governance can be fragile.

A recent Ofsted report confirmed that one major advantage of federations is the improvement they can bring in the governance of weaker schools, provided that they effectively held leaders to account. Results in academies which are part of federations are significantly higher than standard standalone academies.

Those are my four questions. Here are some concluding thoughts.

Leadership focused on improving teaching and learning is what matters most. We need more of it from headteachers and governors – and from academy sponsors and local authorities as well. Ofsted will support leaders and governors who are focusing on this key issue, but will also be pretty intolerant of those that focus on peripheral issues.

One of the lessons from academies is that strong sponsors from outside education can provide an invaluable perspective to help school improvement and can provide some invaluable insights into classroom performance.

I experienced this first-hand at Mossbourne in Hackney working with the late Clive Bourne, whose Trust established the academy.

Secondly, we know failure and underperformance mostly reside in our poorest communities. And that reflects failures in leadership and governance.

So we need the best governors in these schools. Relying upon traditional recruitment methods is not enough. We need to try something radically different – even if this means paying governors.

Third, if the leadership of teaching is the key, then we should make absolutely sure that governing bodies can focus clearly and cleanly on it and strip out other complications and ensure governors are not burdened with unnecessary bureaucracy.

If I have spelled out some important challenges, then I want to end by returning to my note of optimism at the start.

I honestly believe we have a better chance now than ever before of improving our whole education system to make it world class. It can only be done with good governance and your help.

And thank you for your work; you do a great service to our nation.