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Speech by Sir Michael Wilshaw, Director of Education, ARK Schools
Good schools for all – an impossible dream?

Somebody said to me the other day “I see you’ve gone over to the other side.” For a brief moment, given my advanced age, I thought he’d heard that I had died and gone to heaven. Then, of course, I realised what he meant – that I had gone to Ofsted. However, the idea of being an Ofsted angel, shedding light and warmth, may not be the image that people will remember me by in the next few years.

First of all, may I say how sad it is to leave headship after twenty six years. My leadership of Mossbourne in Hackney and, before that, St Bonaventure’s in Newham, has been a wonderful experience, as has been my work with great headteachers and teachers within the ARK network of academies.

There is no better job than headship and I have been privileged over the last quarter of a century to work with so many committed people dedicated to changing young people’s lives, particularly, in poor, disadvantaged areas. Teaching, at its best, is such a noble profession. I need to say those words with great force and sincerity because I want people to remember them when I am at Ofsted, particularly, when I have occasion – if it should ever arise - to criticise some of the profession’s working practices.

I have to say that there is a marked contrast between the last twenty five years of my teaching career and those of the first twenty, when things were not so enjoyable. In fact, I stand here today despite those years and not because of them. I stuck it out because I loved teaching and wanted to make a career of it, but too many of my colleagues – good, talented and vibrant young people – left teaching in those years, disillusioned. Our education system was failing our children, particularly, those from poor backgrounds.

I think it is interesting to recall, just for a few minutes, some of the issues that went badly wrong in our school system in the Seventies and Eighties and try to learn some lessons for

the future, especially because the economic circumstances of that period were similar to those we are going to experience over the next decade and maybe beyond.

I started teaching in Bermondsey in Docklands in 1968 when the docks really were the docks and the children in the school came from dockers' families in Millwall and Rotherhithe soon to be relocated to Tilbury, as containerisation took hold.

1968 was also the year of revolutions in Europe, not to be sustained, of course, but exciting at the time. But, I can't remember any stirrings of revolutionary fervour in the educational world of the late Sixties or Seventies. In fact, my memory, as a young teacher, is that education did not particularly loom large in the national consciousness. Prime Ministers didn't tend to make speeches on education as they do now. It simply wasn't important enough. If all I could remember was that the Duke of Wellington said something about the Battle of Waterloo being won on the playing fields of Eton, there wasn't much encouragement for the rest of us. The post of Education Secretary simply did not have the same status and clout as it does today.

Indeed, if Kenneth Baker, one of the great reforming Secretaries of State, twenty years later, regarded his reshuffle from Environment to Education as the equivalent of a move from Arsenal to Charlton Athletic (not even then in the First Division), then I am sure some of his predecessors must have seen their role as equivalent to a managerial position at Hartlepool United – with no offence intended to supporters of Hartlepool or to those previous education ministers.

So I think the first lesson of that era is that the political will of a Secretary of State for Education, in the front-line of politics, is absolutely vital. Without it, everything slips into the sand and education reform grinds to a halt.

The second lesson is that governments should never take their eye off the education ball, even when the economic going gets tough – and it didn't get much tougher than those two decades.

The economic turmoil of those times had a profound effect on our education system and schools. Almost continuous industrial action, the three-day week, turmoil in Ireland, bombs in London and a sense of post-imperial decline led to a sort of national depression. Crisis management was the order of the day. If Harold Wilson (in the mid-Seventies) thought that Britain had become ungovernable, it is hardly surprising that he, and those that succeeded him in government, didn't show sufficient urgency in developing an education system which would prepare the workforce for the new industries that would, one day, replace the old. So whatever happens in the next few years, however hard the economic travails,

governments and secretaries of state for education must maintain the impetus for education reform.

In the absence of government focus, others filled the vacuum, sometimes with good will and good effect, sometimes not. Political control of education in local government was too often seen as an end in itself rather than the means to raise standards.

The imposition of a party-political agenda on schools, the occasional vilification of those who didn't subscribe to it and the eventual conflict over grant-maintained status, were the most obvious manifestations of this.

So, the third lesson of this era is that devolved power, unconstrained by government direction, does not necessarily raise standards. We need to remember this in the context of today's agenda of devolving power to schools and heads.

A government cannot monitor or administer 30,000 schools from the centre, but it does have a duty to put into place local checks and balances to satisfy itself that an increasingly autonomous system is held regularly to account. I'm sure policy makers are working on this as I speak. The idea of district superintendents or school commissioners responsible directly to the Secretary of State has already been floated and it is something that we should consider further.

The industrial action of the mid-Eighties compounded the tensions I've already described, as did an over-cosy relationship between local authorities and teacher associations.

The power of headteachers to shape and influence schools and school policy took a battering. Many distinguished heads I got to know in the early years of headship, took early retirement – bitter at the undermining of their authority, the politicisation of schools and, quite simply, worn out by industrial action.

I still bear the scars of those days, not just because of poor industrial relations but also, in the context of the time, it took a very brave head, or a foolhardy one, to focus on school improvement and the issue of staff competence.

I thought I would mention this case to you for two reasons: firstly, to remind ourselves that when people talk glibly about taking action against inadequate or incompetent staff, how difficult and emotionally draining it can be and how the equilibrium of the staffroom can be unbalanced for a period of time.

The second reason is because the performance agenda in schools and the demands for greater accountability, mean that there is now a greater expectation that heads tackle the issue of capacity more quickly when children are being manifestly and consistently failed.

It is also worth mentioning that a dependency culture grew up amongst heads at this time, which often militated against the development of powerful individuals capable of championing their schools and promoting high standards. My first headteacher, Bridie Burns, a good head for her time, would always respond to every initiative by saying, "Well, now Michael, I'm not sure the LEA would accept that".

In the same way, when local management of schools was introduced in the late Eighties there was much hand-wringing from a number of heads worried that they wouldn't be able to cope without the 'comfort blanket' of the Local Authority. "I wasn't trained to be a business manager", "I wasn't trained to be an accountant", "I wasn't trained to handle millions of pounds" – not exactly the kind of utterances you would expect from today's entrepreneurial, swashbuckling, go-getting heads.

The last lesson of this period, and perhaps the most important one, is that the educational establishment can easily become over-protective of its own position and intensely resistant to any form of intervention or scrutiny.

The reaction to Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin speech in 1976 was, I suppose, the best example of how defensive this establishment could be. When he raised some fairly straightforward issues on school standards he came in for some rough treatment. The Times Education Supplement sneered at the speech. Its editorial referred to the opening of the "Great debate" as "an anti climax" and suggested that the Inspectorate were much more sophisticated than the Prime Minister could ever be in dealing with the curriculum and other matters.

The NUT excoriated it and the then Chief Inspector of Schools, Sheila Brown, admonished Callaghan's speech writer, Bernard Donoghue, saying "What are you doing interfering in education, this is none of your business."

When you look at Callaghan's speech from a distance of over thirty years, it is remarkable how contemporary his concerns were.

He said that as he toured the country he sensed the "unease felt by parents and others by the new methods of teaching which seemed to produce excellent results when they were in well-qualified hands, but were much more dubious when they were not." He argued that the goals of education are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively,

constructive place in society and also fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other, but both..." "There is no virtue in producing socially, well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they don't have the skills."

Politicians often make remarks like this now; few had dared to do so before. A lot of the concerns he raised still bedevil the system now. Indeed, if Callaghan was speaking today, he might have added to his concerns by asking the following questions:

- ***Are expectations high enough in the state sector, particularly, in disadvantaged areas?***
- ***Why should equality and elitism be too often seen as incompatible?***
- ***Why do we ignore traditional values and approaches in our comprehensive system when they seem to work in grammar schools and the independent sector?***
- ***Do we really make every effort to provide children with basic skills, particularly, the ability to read, so that they can more easily access the primary and secondary curriculum?***
- ***Do we designate children with special needs too quickly as a cover for not teaching them well enough in the early years of their education?***
- ***Do we do our best to stretch the most able students so that they can proceed, in sufficient numbers, to higher education and to the top universities?***
- ***Do we adopt a sufficiently rigorous approach to teaching which balances the need for children to acquire knowledge as well as skills?***
- ***Do we give sufficient attention to the importance of school culture and behaviour as a prerequisite to raising attainment?***
- ***Do we too often ignore the concerns of parents to the point where those, who can afford it, send their children to the private sector?***

Callaghan's legacy is that he prompted others to follow in his footsteps and storm the citadels of the education establishment. The Secretary of State's post is now seen almost on the same par as the three major offices of state. The 'secret garden' is being dug up and the lawn relaid. Political will is making a difference and standards are rising, although not quickly enough for some.

I also sense that the professional associations are learning from the past. They are seeing themselves, much more, not just as representatives and champions of their members'

interests, but partners in educational progress and reform. I am sure they recognise that a strong body of skilled practitioners enhances the status of the profession, has a better chance of garnering support from the public and lends credibility to their claims for better pay and conditions. They recognise that they must not appear to defend the indefensible but seek, whenever possible, to co-operate with school management to promote good practice. No head teacher with good evidence should ever feel constrained to challenge competence and poor performance because of unreasonable union behaviour.

With the impending demise of the GTC, unions should be increasingly seen as regulators of the profession - as voluble on professional standards as on pay and conditions; as prepared to condemn, for example, unprofessional dress as unacceptable levels of workload.

It is so important that teachers convey a professional image to young people whose perception of adults is so often determined by those things that we sometimes see as trivial – dress and demeanour. Ofsted should feel free to comment on this as part of its overall evaluation of school performance, particularly, in relation to the quality of staff/student relationships.

So what of Ofsted?

Ofsted should play its part in not only commenting on this changing landscape, but also by challenging the system to improve through the rigour of the judgement criteria in the new inspection framework. The new framework is one I support because it focuses on the key issues which drive school improvement.

Under the new framework, Ofsted will say much more about the quality of teaching and the leadership of teaching.

Headteachers must be what the title implies - leaders of teaching. They are not head managers or head administrators. Good management supports good teaching, not the other way round. Ofsted will expect to see good monitoring and professional development programmes in place which support good teaching and learning. It should also see formal reports from the headteacher to the governing board which summarise collective and individual teacher performance. Ofsted should comment on the correlation between this summary and Ofsted's own judgements of teaching and learning in the inspection.

Ofsted will also want to comment on the link between the quality of teaching and salary progression, particularly to threshold and upper pay spine levels. If, for example, only 50% of lessons are judged as good and above in the inspection, but Ofsted notes that most staff

have progressed to the next point on their salary spine, including threshold, inspectors need to ask whether the performance management system of the school is sufficiently robust and providing good value for money.

Identifying good and outstanding teachers, supporting those with capacity to improve and addressing the issue of consistently poor performance are not only crucial to strong school leadership, but also to systemic school improvement. I will say it again: good headship is not only about an intense knowledge of the school but also about challenging systems, students and staff to do better.

The Sutton Trust has some startling figures on the quality of teaching and the progress of children:

“The difference between a very effective teacher and a poorly performing teacher is very large. For example, during 1 year with a very effective Maths and English teacher, pupils gain 40% more in their learning than they would with a poorly performing teacher.”

“The effects of high quality teaching are, especially, significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over a school year, these pupils gain 1.5 years’ worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with a poorly performing teacher. In other words, for poor pupils, the difference between a good teacher and a bad one is a whole year’s learning.”

“Bringing the lowest-performing 10% of teachers in the UK up to the average would hugely boost attainment and lead to school improvement in the UK’s international ranking. All other things being equal, in 5 years, the UK ranking amongst OECD countries would improve from 21st in reading to as high as 7th; from 22nd in Maths to as high as 12th. Over 10 years (the period a child is in the UK system before PISA tests are held) the UK would improve its position to as high as 3rd in reading and as high as 5th in Maths.”

Consistently good teaching will help schools in general but, particularly, the long tail of underperformance in some of our more disadvantaged areas. *(Don’t need this)* Inspectors should judge whether the pupil premium is being used appropriately to promote good teaching and provide strong study support systems. I have no apologies for saying that schools in the most difficult areas have to act as surrogate parents to ensure that our most vulnerable children can achieve. Unions should support this. It’s a moral issue as well as an educational one. Again, the OECD figures on children’s well-being in the UK, i.e. their sense of overall happiness and sense of security, make depressing reading. If you talk to children at Mossbourne, many will tell you that they feel happier and safer in school than they do in their home environments.

An Institute of Education chart showing the distance that parents were willing to let their children travel in the area around Sheffield, over 3 generations, graphically demonstrates how constrained children's lives have become.

- In 1919, Great Grandfather George, aged 8, was allowed to walk 6 miles to go fishing.
- In 1950, Grandfather Jack, also 8 at the time, was able to walk about 1 mile on his own to the woods.
- In 1979 Mother Vicky, aged 8, was allowed to walk to the swimming pool alone, half a mile away.
- Today, her son Ed, aged 8, is only allowed to walk on his own to the end of his street.

If parents no longer feel their children are safe, they come to rely on schools as a substitute community and surrogate family. In short, schools must play an increasingly important part in the lives of children who come from unstructured and sometimes dysfunctional home backgrounds. If they don't, then poverty and class is going to continue to be a predictor of success.

Let's again look at the facts:

Children growing up today in the UK from the poorest 1/5th of families are already a year behind those children from middle income families in reading and vocabulary tests by the age of 5 when children start school. These gaps in academic achievement steepen as pupils progress through the school system, in part, because of the crucially important part played by family and environment. Parenting style and the home environment (trips to museums, galleries etc) contribute up to half of the cognitive gap between the lowest and middle-income families.

The most successful heads in challenging areas as exemplified in Ofsted's 12 Outstanding Primary and Secondary Schools in Challenging Areas are demonstrating that poverty and background should not be predictors of failure. I have so much admiration for these head-teachers because they stand as an affront to colleagues in more prosperous parts of this country who are settling for second best.

In his speech to the Fabian Society in 2003 entitled *Access and Achievement in Urban Education*, David Bell, the previous Chief Inspector of Schools, painted a bleak picture of educational progress in the poorest areas of the country since a similar report written in 1993. However, let me quote one paragraph:

"It is important to stress that although schools in these areas find it difficult to improve, there are some that can cope and are doing well. Indeed, some schools are doing extremely well compared to schools nationally. Inspections show that the higher-attaining

disadvantaged urban schools are better led and managed. What makes the difference is the clarity, intensity and persistence of the school's work and the rigour with which it is scrutinised. At best, all the energy of the school serves the same end, raising standards. Good leaders in these schools have vision and can apply it in practical ways. They are flexible, spot opportunities and deal imaginatively with problems. They 'grow their own' solutions."

This growing number of outstanding leaders is making the difference. They are the ones that are starting federations and chains of schools which will provide hope for the future. They, of course, deserve an outstanding rating from Ofsted especially if their schools have demonstrated not only outstanding progress, but also outcomes at or beyond national averages.

Ofsted needs to recognise these high performing schools but also decide whether an "outstanding" rating should be given to those schools that might be making good progress, but not achieving to national averages. It is important that Ofsted sends signals of national ambition through its grading criteria. All children, irrespective of background and class, should be able to achieve these minimum levels of performance which will give them access to life's opportunities.

By the same token, Ofsted should be critical of those schools which may be achieving to national averages and beyond, but whose uncontextualised value-added is below or just above the mean. So called "coasting schools" should take note.

Are these schools "satisfactory" - a descriptor which I think should be removed because it sends the wrong message to parents and others on the nature of acceptable provision. If "satisfactory" is replaced with a simple grade 3, it would give inspectors the opportunity to use their judgement to describe standards of the school in depth; explain why it's not yet a good school and what capacity it has for improvement. Some schools within this category that are not moving forward will, of course, be given a "notice to improve".

I would hope that the first page of any Ofsted report contains an explanation of the descriptor which should be communicated to parents and others in a straightforward and unambiguous way.

Ofsted, along with other levers of accountability in the system, especially government regulation, should constantly challenge the system to do better. It must not entrench mediocrity by describing standards as "good" or "outstanding" if they are not. This is especially so in relation to teaching. A "good" school will have good teaching. An "outstanding" school will have outstanding teaching.

These messages might sound tough, but they need to be if our national education provision is to improve, particularly for those children who consistently underperform. The gap be-

tween the best and the worst; the richest and the poorest is still too large with serious consequences for social mobility and cohesion.

McKinsey has shown that wage differentials based on educational attainment are growing starker. In the UK and US in 1979, a male with a first degree could expect 51% more in his lifetime than his peer with just end of school qualifications. By 2004, this had risen to 96%. In 2011 it is probably higher still. In other words, higher skills and higher cognitive abilities, even for those not pursuing academic programmes, but more vocational pathways, are increasingly valued commodities in the rapidly evolving market place.

The Secretary of State makes great play of our decline in PISA International Rankings: 4th to 16th in science, 8th to 28th in maths and 7th to 25th in literacy. At the age of 15, Shanghai is 2 years ahead of us in maths attainment levels.

The million or so young people that are now out of work are not going to thank us for ill-equipping them for the increasing demands of the 21st century workplace. As President Obama has recently said, "The nations that out-educate us will outperform us."

Government and Ofsted can create the framework and raise the bar for schools, colleges and other educational institutions. But I am very conscious that it is teachers and head teachers who make the difference. The new Ofsted framework will focus on the central issues of school improvement. In my view, the most important judgements will be on leadership. Quite bluntly, good schools with good student progress, good teaching and good behaviour are led by good leaders.

The challenge for our nation is to identify and nurture great leaders who can thrive in an increasingly autonomous and independent system; who are entrepreneurial in spirit and able to challenge the status quo in order to improve the life chances of young people. Above all, they are people conscious of the power vested in them to make the difference.

I am encouraged by the number of terrific young people coming into the profession – the best that I have seen in 43 years. They will become great future leaders as long as we don't let them slip away, disillusioned as many were, when I started teaching.

We need to ensure we spot talent in a way that a large corporation would; spend money and time on our future leaders so that they can work with the best heads in the land; so that they know at an early stage what a good and outstanding school looks like. The growing number of school federations and clusters will help this process.

Headship is great and I leave it with much sadness. I hope I have been a good leader who, like many others in my position, know that vision allied to pragmatism are the great qualities of headship.

So I end this talk by trying to answer the question. Are good schools for all an impossible dream? Like a good headteacher we should remain visionary and optimistic, but also pragmatic in knowing that we are a long way off from achieving this dream. Only continuing political will, clear policy direction, strong accountability systems and, above all, great leadership will get us there.