

HMCI speech to the National College of School Leaders

15 June 2012

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I'm delighted to be here today to take this opportunity as the new Chief Inspector to speak to the National College and to the very large numbers of heads and leaders of schools assembled here.

It's a tribute to Steve and his colleagues, and, of course, to many of you, that school leadership in England is now ranked by the OECD as the best in the developed world. This is a great platform on which to build.

I thought I would just spend a few minutes at the start of my speech saying something about myself, what I believe in and why I've decided to do this job after 26 years of headship. I also think it important to dispel some of the myths propagated by the press and others about what I stand for.

Central to my credo – and without resorting to cliché – is the belief that education has the power to change lives and shape our society. Like you, I am what I am because of a good school and the teachers who taught me. Children and young people have got one chance of a good education. They never get that chance again.

It's the belief that every child should have a good education which is at the heart of our work, and of the reforms Ofsted is introducing in the new inspection framework.

I came into teaching in the late 60s committed to that belief. Even in the dark days of the 20 years that followed – the shambolic 70s and the awful 80s, when we failed huge numbers of children – I held fast to it. I didn't flit from school to school but always saw a year group through from when they started until their GCSEs or A levels.

I spent 17 years in my first headship, nine in my second, interspersed with a few secondments to some failing schools. I immersed myself in the communities in which I worked, got to know what was unique about them, loved pacing the corridors and playgrounds, doing bus duty and engaging pupils and staff in classrooms. Quite simply, I loved teaching and headship, even when times were tough.

I was always conscious of the unique position of school leadership to set the tone and culture of a school and imbue it with a sense of aspiration and optimism. I always felt it was important to say to staff: even on the most difficult days – you know the sort of days I mean – when the fire alarm goes off unexpectedly, a bad

fight has just happened in the playground and a stroppy parent is creating havoc outside your office – I always felt it was important to say to staff, 'we're heading in the right direction: we may not yet be a great school, but we're going to get there'.

I knew that as a leadership team we had to show calm in extremis. We had to have a sense of where the school was going. Above all, we had to paint a brighter picture of the future. If we didn't, despondency would have soon set in and permeated the culture of the school.

Your job, of course, carries stress – which important one doesn't? But you know it's also hugely rewarding. It's a job we should feel privileged to do. If we have any failings as leaders, it's that we don't say what a great job this is often enough and shout about it from the rooftops.

Certainly the heads and leaders I've met in the last few weeks and months share those qualities of confidence and optimism. For example:

- Paul Rafferty and his team, who lead Laygate Community College in South Shields. They have done tremendous work in raising standards from a very low base – so much so that the school was named as one of the most improved schools in the country in January 2012.
- Anne Lakey, Chief Executive of the Durham Federation who first led Durham Community Business College to outstanding status. She then also took on a failing school in the area which was in desperate circumstances and threatened with closure. Now it is outstanding too.
- Julia Dodson, Headteacher of Acocks Green Primary School in Birmingham, which improved from satisfactory in 2009 to outstanding in 2011. On my visit, Julia demonstrated a real passion for raising standards in a very deprived part of the city. Virtually all her children, many of whom speak English as an additional language, achieve well above national benchmarks.

All of these heads were leading schools in tough areas and dealing with disadvantaged children. Not all were yet running outstanding schools, but all had huge ambitions for the children they served.

As a result, the children were making great progress, regardless of their background. These headteachers are running schools that are beacons in their communities. They are sunny, confident people who enjoy their job. They made no excuses for their children's backgrounds. They were determined they were going to succeed.

They were typical of great heads up and down the country with guts, determination and vision.

These are people who would do well in any leadership role and in any job – people who acknowledge the difficulties of headship but roll up their sleeves and get stuck in.

They do this because now, more than ever, power, authority and resources are invested in them as leaders to solve the innumerable problems they encounter each day.

So, if they've got a recruitment problem, they think creatively about how to get the right staff. They look abroad if they need to. They network with other heads. They incentivise their own staff to find teachers. They open up recruitment stands at the local supermarket.

If they've got a problem with funding, they write hundreds of letters to local businesses and endowment funds.

If they've got a problem with kids messing about on the bus, they do what a great head I once knew used: disguise. I don't expect you all to do that – but it does indicate the kind of character great school leaders have.

These are heads who are passionate about standards. They understand that although they have to work with many different agencies and support services, they are not social workers or education welfare officers. They believe powerfully that they are educators whose job it is to give children and young people the skills and qualifications to achieve well in life.

That's why, although there aren't many bouquets in my job, I get such huge satisfaction from visiting great schools, led by wonderful people. They are very much like many of you sitting in this audience today who are as intolerant as I am of mediocrity. So let's speak plainly – we've got to go further and faster to ensure that our school system is world-class.

Andreas Schleicher, Assistant Director of the OECD, puts it well. 'It's no longer good enough in terms of global competitiveness just to show how you've improved as a nation,' he said. 'You've also got to show how you are improving in comparison with everyone else'.

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.

For all these reasons, and more, we can't maintain the status quo. We really have to look at the world around us and see the pace of education reform in other countries.

We also need to worry about the social and economic consequences if we do not make radical improvements to our education system. Last summer, particularly we saw what happens when we don't worry about it.

That's why we are making radical changes to the way Ofsted works with schools from September – changes that should support schools in making the necessary improvements.

Ofsted will support the school which may not yet be good but is striving to get to good as quickly as possible. Even though a school may be judged to require improvement under the new inspection arrangements, Ofsted will very clearly highlight the part that leadership is playing in making a difference and setting an upward trajectory.

Ofsted will support the head who makes it his or her central task to lead the improvement of teaching and learning – monitoring what's happening in the classroom and providing strong professional development to improve practice.

Ofsted will support good teachers with a passion for their subject, who fully engage children and ensure they make good progress.

But – and I want to emphasise this – Ofsted inspectors will not arrive with a preferred teaching style or model lesson.

Lessons, of course, should be planned, but not in an overcomplicated or formulaic way. A crowded lesson plan is as bad as a crowded curriculum. We don't want to see a wide variety of teaching strategies unless they have coherence or purpose.

If an inspector walks into a classroom and all the pupils are working on an extended task for the whole time the inspector is there, then that's fine. If the teacher is reading a play with the class and they are all engaged, that's fine too. Inspectors will want to see evidence that pupils are making good progress, but we're not going to be prescriptive about lesson structure.

Our recent report, *Moving English forward*, sharply criticised the lack of extended reading and writing exercises undertaken by pupils. Inspectors reported that pupils rarely had the opportunity to read, write or discuss ideas in depth in the classroom.

I'm deeply concerned by this, so let me be clear now: if the teacher is adopting a low profile in the classroom but the youngsters are getting on with their work, reading and writing extensively, that's absolutely fine.

Ofsted will support the head who wants to reward those teachers who deliver well. You know that strong performance management systems are crucial. In my experience, good teachers are more irritated than anyone else when they see less hardworking colleagues receiving the same rewards as they get. There has to be a correlation between pay and performance, especially in these constrained times.

Ofsted will support brave heads facing entrenched opposition in making necessary improvements. And we would expect governors to support them.

Indeed, some of the heads I met over the last few months found that complacent governors were one of their biggest problems in supporting other schools.

These governors happily tolerated mediocrity because they perceived their schools to be happy, comfortable places. Yet, the data showed their children were underachieving. This situation can't go on.

Ofsted, in the new framework, will, therefore, ask searching questions on governance – particularly on whether the school is being properly held to account.

Interim Executive Boards are, of course, a response to failure of governance. But before going down this route, we should surely ensure that all schools have effective governance. And if they don't when we re-inspect under the new arrangements, we will expect them to get it quickly.

Ofsted will support schools in the new 'requires improvement' category. Let me assure you we will not walk away. Through closer monitoring, inspection and support, HMI will work with these schools for as long as it takes to get them to a good category.

We know from recent research at the Institute of Education and the LSE that schools given a notice to improve can be turned around much more quickly than those which are found to be satisfactory. In the same way, therefore, I have no doubt that schools put into the 'requires improvement' category from September will quickly become good schools.

Ofsted will support and listen to headteachers.

We have listened, for example, to concerns about completely unannounced inspections. A lot of the good and outstanding heads I've spoken to in the consultation weren't particularly worried about unannounced inspection in terms of seeing schools as they really are.

They also understood that the proposal wasn't about catching people out, but was really about relieving the stress that can be caused when there's too much build-up to an inspection.

Nevertheless, they were worried about not being present on the first day of the inspection, especially if they were supporting other schools.

That's why from September, we will call schools the afternoon before the inspection. In other words, not unannounced inspection, but shorter notice inspection.

I'm determined that Ofsted will support good and aspirational headteachers. But we need your support in return.

I want national leaders of education to join the inspection service. I know some of you here will be part of the 40-strong cohort of heads that will be trained as Additional Inspectors from September.

Too many heads say too few inspectors have recent leadership experience in schools. This is your chance to do something about it. I am delighted that so many of you are taking this opportunity. I hope the experience will provide you with some valuable ideas to use in your own schools.

I've joined Ofsted after a career in school leadership. I particularly hope that those of you who are approaching retirement consider inspection as a way of developing your influence in the education system. Maybe, in the fullness of time, there will be financial incentives for you to do that.

My ambition is that by the time I leave this office, every inspection team will contain an outstanding school leader.

I look forward to joining many of you at the workshop later today.

One reason I'm keen for heads to join the inspection system is that I really don't want, as Chief Inspector, to continue to say the same things each year when the Annual Report is delivered – that there is too much mediocrity in the system and that failure too often resides in our poorest communities.

However, let me be clear, I understand how tough it can be leading schools in our poorest communities. I really do recognise how some schools have to battle against an anti-learning culture within the communities they serve. *The Observer* newspaper a few weeks ago put it well. They spoke about white working class areas where:

'young people are padlocked into their communities, [by] a lack of ambition reflected in their friends, relatives and the negative assumptions of some teachers. The chances to experience other worlds, acquire the information that counts, enter networks that matter and cultivate the ambition that won't let go are undernourished.'

It wasn't always so. In working class communities in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, there was real respect for education. People used the new free libraries, set up reading and cultural clubs, and translated that respect for education into support for teachers and schools.

That tradition led to the birth of the Workers' Educational Association and Ruskin College.

This tradition was well captured in the recent National Theatre revival of Lee Hall's *The Pitmen Painters*, a celebration of a tradition that continued into the 1930s in northern mining communities and the Welsh valleys. People wanted to improve themselves and they saw learning as the best way to do it.

Or, as one of the painters, George, puts it in the play:

'They're not gonna leave yer Shakespeare and Goethe just for the upper classes now – it's gonna belong to us.'

We need to bring back ambition to communities that lack aspiration. Schools too often have to try to pick up the pieces where society has failed.

I know many of you try to do so with teachers who are great role models. They set high standards and care about their pupils. But schools simply can't plug all the gaps left by society's failings, nor should we expect them to do so.

Nobody has ever accused me of being soft on the shortcomings of schools. But equally, I don't think we should be soft on the shortcomings of our society – and under-estimate the impact they that have on schools and their pupils.

Of course, most parents today want the best for their children. They do what they can to support their children's learning, and make real sacrifices in the process.

But too many children and young people come to school against a backdrop of lost standards, values and ambitions.

As Chief Inspector, my remit is to inspect and regulate education and care. But I also need to recognise the context in which I do so. And while some social indicators have improved, few could ignore the continuing challenge of, for example:

- teenage pregnancy rates, which may be at their lowest level in four decades, but with 35,000 a year remain extremely high by international standards
- crime generally may have fallen but 300,000 young people a year are arrested or cautioned
- 400,000 children miss a month of school through truancy each year
- but perhaps the biggest impediment to aspiration is that one in six children lives in a household where no adult is working.

And these figures are exacerbated by family breakdown, as one in five children has only one parent at home, usually a mother struggling to do her best for her child.

For boys, the absence of a regular and stable male influence can be particularly difficult. Dads need to see bringing up children as the right and manly thing to do.

All these issues can have a direct impact on education outcomes.

Young people need boundaries set by parents and society, not just by their schools.

They need more stability at home and more security in their communities if they are going to succeed.

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

- In 1919, great grandfather George, aged eight, was allowed to walk six miles to go fishing.
- In 1950, grandfather Jack, also eight at the time, was able to walk about one mile on his own to the woods.
- In 1979, mother Vicky, aged eight, was allowed to walk to the swimming pool alone, half a mile away.
- Today, her son Ed, aged eight, is only allowed to walk on his own to the end of his street.

It is an indictment of our society when children say they can't visit one estate, or cross a road, because they worry about getting beaten up.

But while this is all important context, it should never limit our ambitions. Indeed it should spur us to do more to break this cycle of deprivation.

So, we need to repair community strength. We need to do more to develop good parenting skills and reinvigorate a sense of responsibility within families.

This is not a counsel of despair. It's simply to say that schools can make a bigger difference than ever in overcoming society's failures.

It's really important then that we learn from what works, both here and abroad.

If some schools and communities can successfully narrow the gap, why can't others do so too?

What are the big policy and structural solutions that need to be considered?

What are the big barriers that we need to break down?

Twenty years ago, Ofsted produced a landmark report entitled *Access and achievement in urban education*, which described the lack of educational success and the paucity of good schools in deprived communities.

Ten years later, David Bell, the then Chief Inspector of Schools, marked the anniversary by producing another report under the same headline.

What was so depressing was that his report painted a similarly bleak picture of underperformance in these same communities.

Since then, there have been some big improvements especially in London and for some ethnic minority groups.

And there has been some narrowing of the gap since David Bell gave his lecture. The proportion of pupils on free school meals gaining expected national test scores or reaching the GCSE benchmark has improved faster than that of other pupils.

But a 17-point gap by Key Stage 2 English rising to a 27-point gap at GCSE is still far too wide.

I will be producing a report early next year under the same headline to mark the twentieth anniversary of the first report. I want to see what radical solutions we can find to make a real difference to these gaps.

To prepare for this report and address the issues I've already mentioned, I am today announcing an important new review to mark the twentieth anniversary.

I will chair a panel of leading heads and academic experts that will seek to answer some key questions.

I want your help in identifying the solutions that work best. Of course, there is no single answer, but we need to learn from what we know works to help you to narrow those gaps.

Yes, we need more community cohesion and stronger home lives.

But we also need to see where you are making a difference and where you can make an even bigger difference to narrowing those gaps.

I promise you that this commission and inquiry will come up with radical recommendations to government on what needs to be done to address these deep-seated problems.

So, please do feed your ideas and experiences to the commission, because at Ofsted I want to ensure that we continue not only to identify where things need to improve but also to share what is working well in our schools and academies.

As befits someone who has been in teaching for 40 years, I do occasionally allow myself a moment to reflect on the past. And for all the challenges that we face in education today, we are collectively in a stronger place than we have been for a long time.

We've come a long way together. Let nobody doubt that. The progress we have made is largely due to the quality of leadership in our schools. Your leadership is now seen as world-leading.

But let us be in no doubt that we still have a lot more to do.

Together we have a real chance to transform the lives of many more young people.

I know you have the experience and skills to meet that challenge – and what I can promise you today is that I will always back good heads and teachers who are making a difference to their pupils.

You have my word on that.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to take your questions.