

“Strong Governance for Schools”

This is the text of a speech given by Sir Michael Wilshaw at the NGA Conference in June 2012 – Sir Michael was knighted in 2000 for services to education, having been head teacher of a school in London and Executive Principal of Mossbourne Academy in Hackney. His appointment as Chief Inspector of Schools became effective in January of the current year. Sir Michael is noted for having a somewhat controversial style.

Sir Michael Wilshaw (Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools)

The chairman introduced the Keynote Speaker, Sir Michael Wilshaw, HMCI, who held ‘the second most powerful job in Education’. He held strong opinions and views, and was not afraid to speak his mind.

Sir Michael began by saying it was good to be with people who had such a key part to play. Schools had the power to change lives, and he was optimistic about what we can do if we learn from the best teachers and practitioners. Heads and Governors should never be satisfied until schools were the best they could be. Sir Michael reflected on the beginning of his teaching career, in 1968 in Inner London and the rigid ideology that existed then, and the lack of caring. He spoke of Hackney Downs, which became Mossbourne Academy, and how change had come about. Education had moved on light years now. There were more resources and more autonomy. These had been matched by more accountability. Standards had risen, especially in the best locations, but the gap was still too wide. A third of pupils left primary school lacking skills in maths and English; a quarter left secondary school without reaching the GCSE benchmark; and one in seven adults lacked the skills needed to cope with life. The UK lagged behind in the numbers staying on in education – according to the OECD, all other developed countries were ahead of the UK in this – and we lagged behind in PISA statistics. Those who lacked skills and qualifications were destined to a lifetime in poverty. We needed to look at education in other countries, and learn from them – how to improve in comparison to others.

There were three reasons for optimism, however: we now had higher calibre teachers; more sharing of expertise in teachers’ own schools and across schools, through federations; and better Heads with good monitoring processes and more autonomy.

There were more than 300,000 governors, ‘the big society in action’. Since LMS there had been more autonomy and responsibility. We now needed governors to work with school leaders in being strategic and pragmatic; to strengthen leadership by appointing the right people; and to hold them to account for standards. Without strong governance this wouldn’t happen. School inspection could play a part in raising achievement, in supporting ambitious Heads and governing bodies (GBs) to get the best for their schools. From September, Ofsted would help this by the changes to categories. What was required was the best for all pupils; so all schools must aim to be Good. Satisfactory would be replaced by ‘Requires Improvement’. Full inspection of such schools would take place within two years. Schools with three such judgements would be placed in Special Measures. However, Ofsted was not in the business of catching people out so all would begin with a clean slate, and the three unsatisfactory judgements would begin from September. To be Outstanding, a school must have outstanding teaching overall. The judgement on the quality of teaching would be based on the quality of learning and the progress children were making. There would be more emphasis on classroom observation. One Inspector for English had commented that there was too little extended Writing and Reading, and too little time given to explanation and discussion. This needed to change.

Sir Michael commented that Ofsted had listened to views in the Consultation and had made some changes as a result, notably abandoning the proposal for no notice inspections. There would be a call the afternoon before a visit so that the Head and governors could arrange to be available. There was also the intention to hold deeper dialogues between inspectors and Heads and governors. They would expect to meet with governors during the inspection and to feed back to them.

Coming to GBs specifically, their work would be assessed on the school's achievement, the quality of teaching and of Leadership and Management (L & M). There would be comment in the report on the strengths and weaknesses of the GB's work. There would be a new handbook, which would include this focus, and inspectors would be trained during July. The core features of good governance included supporting and challenging in regard to the quality of teaching and progress of pupils, and using resources, notably the Pupil Premium appropriately. Schools would be expected to move more quickly to remedy weaknesses. If L & M were not good enough, there would be external assessment of governance arrangements. There must be improvements by the re-inspection. If a school was in Special Measures there would be a monitoring visit within two months, and if there was no improvement an IEB would replace the GB.

Sir Michael drew attention to the Ofsted Report *School Governance: Learning from the Best*. Good governance was ever more important with the growth in autonomy and academies. The Report pointed out that the greatest impact was made when GBs asked challenging questions and asked for evidence. HTs must supply good information so that governors could ask the right questions. GBs should also support HTs in regard to robust Performance Management (PM). Ofsted would want to see that PM was effectively carried out and robust. There should be a correlation between pupils' progress and successful movement above the threshold. GBs needed to ask themselves what they knew about the quality of teaching and the progress of children in school. Some GBs, however, preferred to interest themselves in school meals, uniform and school loos. It was the GB's job to know of weaknesses and where these were. Sir Michael quoted the Sutton Trust's report: '... for pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad one is a whole year's learning'.

What mattered were: good PM of staff and HT; progress made by pupils; the relationship between the HT and the GB; and behaviour. Where teaching was not good, governance proved to be of concern. In 40% of the schools inspected in the last year, where schools were 'satisfactory', governance was satisfactory or worse; in general 'satisfactory' schools had mediocre governance. Schools in disadvantaged areas tended to have poor governance. Good governance was difficult to achieve in poor neighbourhoods. It was better to put in place an IEB so that you got the right people in from the start. National Leaders in Governance could be helpful to schools in this regard. In order to ensure more GBs were strategic, it was necessary for them to look at the Ofsted criteria. Good information was essential. RAISEonline information would be presented in a more condensed document to make it more readable and digestible. As it stood it was too unwieldy. Smaller GBs, which would be possible after September, would also assist, together with the freedom to seek people with more valuable skills. Stakeholder representation tended to lead to a lack of focus. GBs became more of a talking shop. The wrong representation could hold a school back. If there was a more professional approach this allowed for holding the HT to account, rather than becoming operational. The use of good governors to assist in another school could be beneficial. Additional Governors could help, and if these were paid, so be it. Another model was to have one board of governors for a group of schools. This could provide high calibre governance. Academy chains provided good governance. Federations or groups working together could help weaker schools. And standards in chains of academies were higher than in standalone academies.

A focus on Teaching and Learning was most important and we needed more of this. Ofsted would support governors in doing this. A lesson learned from academies was that experts from outside, with their insights, could improve classroom performance. Failure in a school often reflected failure in the HT and GB. The present system of governance was not good enough. Governors should be paid if need be. And GBs should not be burdened by unnecessary bureaucracy. We could improve education and make it world class but could only do this with governors' help.

A number of preselected questions were invited from the floor.

Questions:

Question: Thanked Sir Michael and noted that, in an NGA survey, 80% of governors felt their last inspection had been fair. As the GB is the 'accountable body', should not the report be made to the GB, rather than some governors attending the feedback to the SMT?

Ans: An entirely legitimate question. In the best schools SMT and GB receive the report together. I need to consider the workforce (ie the inspection teams) but I will give this consideration. Watch this space.

Question: I applaud strong governance; this is important to schools. If you are to use serving HTs in inspection teams, why not use experienced governors?

Ans: This may be reasonable if they are properly trained

Question: To quote, 'Inspectors may ask to speak to governors to gain an accurate picture of L & M.' How can you assess this without speaking to governors. A governor in East Sussex reported that an inspector stated that he did not want to speak to governors. Can you assure us inspectors will speak to governors?

Ans: Absolutely. I should be perturbed if this did not happen. In the East Sussex case, this is grounds for a formal complaint.

Question: If governance is to be assessed, why is it 'acceptable' to use only a short phone call as communication.

Ans: Of course this is wrong.

Question: Outstanding is the aim, so how can the GB support a school to become outstanding?

Ans: A school is outstanding if the teaching is outstanding. There should be evidence of consistent outstanding teaching, which means the leadership should be outstanding too. Quality of teaching should be monitored and PM should be robust. Then significant improvements can be achieved.

If HTs don't monitor then problems can arise.

Question: How do you ensure a school is outstanding?

Ans: We should have more outstanding schools. A school needs to be good first, so it can move up. One in three schools is only satisfactory. We must have good teaching throughout the school; must push up from the bottom.

Question: It has been reported that you said, 'if morale is low, the HT is doing something right'.

Ans: This was at a meeting I attended before joining Ofsted. Talking to a group of HTs, we spoke of a failing school one might encounter, where staff were not working. They were

happy but the school had low achievement; then a HT began to make people work. Morale dipped and my comment was that this was because the HT was doing something right. High morale is vitally important.

Qu: Speaking of stress in teaching, you have said that 'teachers have no idea what stress is'. I have been in both teaching and industry and teaching is very stressful. There can be a feeling of bullying.

Ans: This was about Headship. Quality is essential to the success of a school. HTs are masters of their own destiny. They need to paint a positive picture Teaching is stressful but very enjoyable. As for bullying, I have no intention of Ofsted being a bully or of promoting it among HTs.

Question: First, I've been to Mossbourne and congratulate you. There is still a variation in the approach of inspectors, especially where a school is on the borderline – and there are changes made be a remote moderator.

Ans: No-one wants inspection by numbers. It should be a personal, professional judgement based on clear criteria. There are only four judgements now so it should be better. If good teaching is going on, there should be less chance of getting it wrong. If we are wrong, we'll hold our hands up. 90% of schools say the process was fair. In a pilot in September NLEs will join teams, to ensure consistency and give credibility to the inspection process.

Question: I am on the NGA's Special Schools' Governors' Forum. There is a huge breadth of special schools and a problem with different inspectors having different approaches to the different kinds of special needs children's progress. Also, you mention training of inspectors about governance – is this done by governors?

Ans: We do have specialist inspectors and should have. Data on schools is vast; on special schools it should show comparisons with other special schools. All training is done by our expert teams.

The chairman drew the session to a close and thanked Sir Michael.