

Written evidence submitted by Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education

When I appeared before the Select Committee on 31 January I promised to write with further information about some of the questions raised.

Can I start by thanking you and your colleagues for such an enjoyable session? Regardless of our party affiliation or political principles we all share a fierce determination to make opportunity more equal. That came across very clearly in the questioning and, I hope, in the answers I gave.

As I said to the committee I have two clear objectives in this job: to raise standards overall for all children and to close the gap between the wealthy and those less fortunate. The OECD have shown us that the best way to achieve these objectives is through a highly autonomous but highly accountable school system.

Accountability

We spent much of the session discussing the second half of this equation.

I start from the principle that no accountability system is perfect but that not having clear accountability for schools would be disastrous. Our knowledge of education systems in other jurisdictions and of our own past tells us that an absence of clear performance measures leads to poor, patchy, provision and bewildered parents. Inspection is, of course, an important part of our accountability system and I know that Sir Michael Wilshaw's performance before your committee last week will have impressed upon you the passion and energy with which he has started his tenure as HMCI.

But at our session you drew particular attention to the use of data in performance measures and specifically to the DfE secondary floor standard: that at least 35% of students in each school should achieve 5 or more A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths. You noted that this could create a perverse incentive for schools to focus on children on the "C/D borderline" at the expense of others.

It is important to remember that achieving GCSE C grades in English and Maths is not an arbitrary threshold. It is, for many young people, the key to a place at university or a fulfilling career. In 2007, when the last Government introduced their "National Challenge" 914 schools were below our current floor standard. Now it is just 111. That means tens of thousands of young people now have a far wider range of opportunities available to them than in previous years.

Crucially it is not the case, as you feared it might be, that this success in helping more young people over the bar, has come at the expense of the disadvantaged. Since 2007 the number of children on free school meals achieving 5 A*-C with English and Maths has increased by 13 percentage points – which is *higher* than the

increase for all children (12 percentage points).

Nor has the introduction of the floor standard had a negative impact on low attainers. The number of students who achieved level 3 at key stage 2 going on to get 5 A*-C GCSEs including English and Maths has almost doubled since 2007 from 10% to 19%.

One thing this Government has changed in the application of floor standards is to take progress into account as well as raw attainment. This was done to ensure that schools making above average progress but who had a highly disadvantaged intake weren't unfairly targeted. You noted during our session that only a small number of schools previously below the floor moved beyond it following this adjustment, which only goes to show that most schools with very low raw attainment are also not helping their pupils achieve average levels of progress.

It is important, of course, that accountability represents more than simply meeting a minimum standard. In a more autonomous system it is vital that parents and the public can see, understand, and compare information about school performance. Our suite of performance indicators now extends much more widely: headline indicators cover the EBacc, Best 8 Average Point Score and Value Added measures. We now focus clearly on the differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, and between low, middle and high attainers.

From this Spring, we will also publish destination data to show schools' success in getting pupils into post-16 education. It is my intention to develop this into a rounded set of destination information, to equip parents, Ofsted and other interested parties with more comparative data than has ever been available.

School improvement

We also discussed how school improvement would work in a more autonomous education system.

I believe that it has been firmly established over the past decades that schools cannot be improved from the centre. National strategies and departmental task-forces may be able to ensure a minimum level of quality in the system but they cannot drive long-term improvement.

As Sir Michael Barber has said: "you cannot mandate greatness, you have to unleash it".

Our current reforms are all about unleashing the phenomenal talent within the state sector and ensuring the very best headteachers and teachers are leading school improvement.

We have continued, at a faster pace, the last Government's programme of ensuring the very weakest schools are turned around by new academy sponsors. There are

now 337 sponsored academies and we are currently in the process of finding sponsors for the weakest 200 primaries.

Over 1,200 schools have now converted to academy status and these schools are in a strong position to help other schools raise standards by sharing expertise. Currently converter academies are supporting over 1,600 named schools; 37 are already sponsoring, or have agreed to sponsor, weaker schools.

Many of our best academy sponsor chains such as Harris; Leigh; Haberdashers; Cabot; Brooke Weston and Thomas Telford grew out of the 18 original CTCs established by Lord Baker. Just imagine the extraordinary capacity for school-to-school improvement now that 63% of outstanding schools have converted, or are converting to, academy status.

It is also the case that many of our very best schools and federations are taking advantage of our free school reforms to establish new provision so as to offer many more parents the benefits of their expertise. Cuckoo Hall academy in Enfield has already set up one free school and is planning another. The Greenwood Dale Academy Trust are setting up a special free school in Peterborough this year and a mainstream one in 2013. ARK have opened two primary free schools in West London and are opening a secondary in Wandsworth this September.

This explosion of dynamism – replicated across the country – is driving school improvement far quicker than ever before precisely because instead of relying on the creaking machinery of central or local Government it exploits the latent entrepreneurialism of so many in the education profession.

And academy reforms are not the only tool for unleashing greatness through school-to-school improvement. The very best schools in the country are being designated as “Teaching Schools” with a responsibility to transform teacher training and professional development in their area. The first 100 Teaching Schools are already up and running and we plan 500 by the end of the Parliament. We have also designated 557 National Leaders of Education – outstanding headteachers drafted into schools in need of support – with plans to expand their number to 1,000 by 2014.

The cumulative effect of these changes combined with those to the accountability system will be to ensure that struggling schools are quickly and energetically turned around, not by Government, but by fellow professionals.

During our session I committed to provide the following specific information:

Admissions

You asked why there is no flexibility in the Code to delay entry to school. The law does provide flexibility for decisions of parents on a child starting school. Parents already have the option to defer their child’s entry to school until the term after they

turn five. This decision is often based on the parents' very personal views of their child's maturity and readiness to enter reception class. In practice, very few parents exercise this option: 89% of 4-5 year old admissions to reception classes take place in September, 10% in January, and 1% in April. A small number of children postpone starting school until year one.

Academy numbers

On 1 February 2012 there were a total of 1580 Academies open, of which 373 were primary, 1188 were secondary and 19 were special schools. There are a further 618 schools that have applied to convert to become Academies and 128 schools in the pipeline to become sponsored Academies. The Academy converter programme is demand-led with schools setting their own timescales for conversion.

Class sizes

Legislation limits the class sizes for infants to 30 children per teacher with allowances made for additional pupils, in very limited circumstances, such as twins and multiple births, and looked after children. It is also possible for schools with exceptionally high demand to take qualifying measures, such as employing another teacher and splitting classes into smaller sizes. These decisions are made by headteachers. Research shows that children at this earliest stage of their learning progress faster in smaller classes, which is why there are no plans to allow the class size limit of 30 to increase.

Work Experience

We do not currently have an open programme but between September and December last year we provided 24 work experience placements, with a fair and transparent application process. We are committed to support a further 45 placements between March and August this year. Placements are mostly provided for Year 10 and 11 students but also on occasion to undergraduates and post-graduates, and to others on a more informal basis.

The Department for Education – as you would expect – is similarly committed to apprenticeships, and have a fair and structured programme. Of the 12 recruited in our last cohort (2010) all have now secured permanent posts in DfE. On 1 April 11 apprentices will join DfE as part of the National College. We may recruit more apprentices later in the year, depending on the business need.

The Department also supports two Cabinet Office diversity schemes providing internships for 6-8 weeks each summer. Last year the Department had 37 summer interns.

Welfare reforms

You asked me to clarify responsibility for impact assessments on the impact of welfare reforms on children. This is the responsibility of the Department for Work and

Pensions though the Child Poverty Unit – a joint DfE/DWP/HMT team – contributes to these assessments.

Parenting Trials

The Government recognises this and wants to see greater support for parents with children in the foundation years, a critical window in their child's development. This is why we recently announced the trial of universal parenting classes in three areas: Middlesbrough, High Peak (Derbyshire) and Camden. The trial will test how best a new market in parenting classes for all parents can be established. It will run from spring 2012 with the aim of reaching over 50,000 parents.

March 2012