

POLICY WATCH

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What did Ofsted's latest Annual Report have to say about the education system?

"4 out of 10 schools are not good enough." Bad news of course tends to attract the more garish headlines but in truth the annual health check on the English education system as reported in Ofsted's latest Annual Report, tells us little that we do not already know. "Successful teachers raise pupils' aspirations, give them the confidence to succeed and enable them to make rapid progress through challenging activities," less successful teachers don't.

As ever a few particular issues were raised; for instance this year, the Chief Inspector singled out 'poor levels of attainment and attendance of many children in care,' but the crunch issue is still how to make the big leap into providing a world class education system?"

Ten years on from 'education, education, education,' this challenge remains as real as ever as some of the media was quick to point out. The OECD figures this year, those international measures of performance, suggest that funding isn't the problem; "spending on education institutions in the UK increased from 5.5% of GDP in 1995 to 6.1% in 2003 and above the OECD average of 5.9%." Nor is it down to a lack of time being spent in education, "the UK tops the 30 OECD nations in educational expectancy - the number of years that people spend in education - with a child of five now expecting to spend an average of 20.7 years in education."

So what is it that leads Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools to say in 2006 that "the proportion of secondary schools judged to be inadequate remains the greatest challenge to the education system?" Is it that, as some have said, Ofsted's new shorter, sharper inspection system has raised the bar, is it that the high profile accorded to education by the Prime Minister downwards has generated a pervasive sense of anxiety, is it that the curriculum has become too constrained, is it that employers are not, or maybe because they are, in the 'driving seat;' the theories are endless but the answer may be simpler.

"Strong leadership, very good achievement brought about by the very best of teaching and a relentless focus on the progress of each individual;" that seems to be the formula for success adopted by the most successful schools and identified in this Report. A formula where L (leadership) + P (professional expertise) + E (expectation) = S (success.) Politicians can set the conditions, but it's what happens in the classroom that makes the difference.

Over the year Ofsted has undertaken some 40,000 inspection visits covering 32,000 childcare and early learning settings, 6000 maintained schools, 58 FE colleges, 21 sixth form colleges, 21 independent specialist colleges and 36 joint area reviews. It's a reach that will extend next year as Ofsted takes on, from April 2007, the inspection services of the Adult Learning Inspectorate, the Commission for Social Care Inspection and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service.

For schools, two critical questions are asked both by the schools themselves and by the inspectors acting in effect as independent scrutineers: "how good are the outcomes for pupils and how effective is the school in promoting them?"

For those with an interest in post 14 learning, four messages stand out.

First is that things are getting better but not everywhere; not only that, the gap between satisfactory and unsatisfactory is getting worse. Of the 6,000+ maintained schools inspected last year, over 9 in 10 provided "a satisfactory" education while in 6 out of 10 it was "outstanding." Yet in 1 in 12 the provision was "inadequate." Provision in sixth forms was generally 'good' and "better than the in the main part of the school." Of the 9 Academies inspected, "overall effectiveness is good in 3, satisfactory in 5 and inadequate in 1." Of the 58 colleges inspected, "over half" are effective, '4 in 10' are more effective than they were and there is 'a continued trend of improvement.' On the downside, "there remains a small but significant proportion of colleges in which standards are declining." So a scorecard that led the Chief Inspector to conclude that things were "increasingly encouraging but still not good enough." It's a familiar refrain.

Second, in a comment that's particularly pertinent as Local Authorities complete their bids for the initial Gateway process, "most local areas have a clear strategy for provision for learners in the 14 - 19 range." There are, though, some pretty fundamental caveats to this. For instance, "access to vocational and work based learning opportunities was still not wide enough" para 341, "it was difficult to involve (in partnerships) schools that had traditionally worked independently of the local authority," para 341 and "collaboration between partners in planning for work related learning and in the guidance given to students was improving but was still often limited" para 367. The fledgling Young Apprenticeship programme, however, receives a vote of confidence - " a generally successful start."

Third, on that all important area of 'key' skills the report is mixed; more pupils gaining 5 or more A* - C GCSEs generally, up 2% to 56.7%, but a 2% drop in English performance at Key Stage 3, "speaking and listening, the weakest aspects of English not well developed across the curriculum" and ICT activities that when not well planned were "time wasting and unproductive." The essential (functional) skills still therefore remain in official speak, 'an enormous challenge.'

Fourth, and also a current issue is 'teaching to the test' and its impact on young minds. "Much weaker teaching was too narrowly focused on proficiency in examination techniques at the expense of building understanding of concepts and their interrelationships" para 234. Unsurprisingly in such circumstances, "pupils were often bored and passive recipients" and while personalisation may be held up as the panacea, that old friend so familiar on vocational provision, namely "active learning" is what seems to get results. "It is evident that higher achievement is associated with active forms of learning" para 235.

Introducing the Report for the first time as Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert remarked that she was beginning to learn the importance of words like "however" and "nevertheless;" yet 'challenge' or perhaps 'same old challenge' are the words that stand out.

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