

Sir Michael Wilshaw's [2013-14 annual report](#) for Ofsted on the progress and standards achieved by schools has revealed that, while progress has been made in the primary sector, progress in secondary schools has stalled since 2012/13.

One of the key areas of focus for the report was the quality of leadership and management. The report found that 23% of secondary schools have weak leadership and management, compared to just 16% among their primary counterparts.

Governance, school culture and a lack of appropriate challenge and support, were highlighted as the key reasons behind this apparent lack of progress. The report also highlighted continuing issues around parity of provision, particularly for white students from deprived backgrounds.

Governors still too cosy

While the Wilshaw Report recognises the substantial changes that have taken place in England's education system since the coalition government came to power in 2010, it is highly critical of the "cozy relationship" between governors and head teachers, stating that in 114 schools this had declined to levels that were "less than good" and that governors had been misled by heads by being given partial or misleading data.

The recent emphasis on external reviews of governance – a recommendation by Ofsted in cases of weak governance – were deemed to have been fairly ineffective and in some cases, schools had refused to engage with the review's findings. Schools falling into this category were often ones which struggled to recruit and retain governors, the report found.

It would be more surprising if this report had not identified failures of governance. The report begins with a summary of the changes to the the English system over the past four years, which drives home just how wide-ranging these changes have been. This sweeping – and often seemingly unfounded – change has presented enormous challenges for all involved in education – not least school governors.

Dealing with change

Research reveals that governor motivation is largely premised around feelings of [doing a good job and giving something back](#)

. In addition, research into areas of high deprivation has revealed a strong sense of the need to make a difference – not just to individual schools and students but also in terms of communities and the life-chances of the young people within them.

But research [into change – and how people make sense of change](#) – suggests that it takes time for individuals to be able to assimilate externally imposed change into their work and their professional roles. Until this happens they often experience a sense of meaninglessness and alienation from their job.

Recent work analysing data provided by [The Key for School Governors](#) suggested a clear difference in the questions asked by governors in areas of high socio-economic deprivation (as indicated by the number of pupils on free school meals) as opposed to those in more affluent areas. This was particularly true in terms of the question: how can we help governors to be more confident in their role?

Still negating the local?

Governance, like schooling, has no “one-size-fits-all solution”, as those working and researching in the [field of education equity](#) have said on a number of occasions. Yet the lack of local support for governors – due to drastic cuts in LEA education budgets, [the isolation of some academies](#) and [poor standards of training and development](#) – is repeatedly glossed over by government.

The report gives some indication of how both government and inspectorate are attempting to combat this. It stresses the weakness of local oversight and emphasises Ofsted’s new regional structure – while also pointing out the appointment of the eight regional schools commissioners.

But perhaps the most telling statement within this section is the acknowledgement that these commissioners are “being set a challenging task, with relatively few resources of their own”, while also pointing out that the arrangements don’t embrace all schools (“maintained schools” are not included in their brief).

Governance in the spotlight as Ofsted finds 170,000 children in 'inadequate' secondary schools

Written by The Conversation

A recent look through [party proposals](#) for education policy indicated that there is little real engagement by any of the major political parties around how they will attempt to redress the balance between local and central governance of schools – and how struggling governing bodies are to be given real support, particularly in areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

Until then the rhetoric around excellence in education will ring hollow for those 170,000 pupils in inadequate secondary schools in England.

Jacqueline Baxter does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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