

Speech: Damian Hinds speech at Confederation of School Trusts conference

Good morning everyone. I am delighted to be able to join you for this historic conference – the official launch of the Confederation of School Trusts.

Together you have long been a strong and essential voice for the power of setting school leaders free when it comes to raising school standards.

As the Freedom and Autonomy for Schools National Association, for some years now you have worked alongside government to make sure more schools and school leaders have the freedom to make the best decisions on behalf of their pupils and their communities.

Under the leadership of Leora Cruddas, I know the next few years will be just as productive. And I know – new name aside – you will continue to be an important voice for the autonomy and for the benefit of multi-academy trusts.

Today, it is more clear than ever that your voice is needed.

Our country has a long and complex history when it comes to the status and structure of our schools.

If you just look at the last few decades we've had the introduction and then ending of grant maintained status followed by the City Technology Colleges – really the genesis of academies, then the first academies under Tony Blair, followed by their massive expansion under this government.

Slowly and surely, most have come to accept a fundamental point: it is heads and school leaders that should be in the driving seat for deciding what is best for their schools, accountable to their pupils and parents.

[Political content redacted]

Today I want to re-make the case for freedom, for diversity, and for accountability in our school system.

For going forwards, not backwards, as we strive to achieve a world-class education for every child, whatever their background.

It's worth, first of all, underlining just how far we've come on improving our schools these last eight years. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of our teachers and school leaders.

There are 163,000 more six-year-olds now on track to be fluent readers than in 2012.

A reformed curriculum and qualifications.

We have seen the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers narrow across all stages of education.

But the job isn't finished.

I want every child, in every classroom, in all parts of the country to have a world-class education.

No one left behind, whatever their background. That is what I will strive to achieve.

And I've said many times since I took this job that education is a people business. There are no and there can be no great schools without great teachers and great leaders...

As you know, in everything we've been doing to improve education these last few years, we have put a strong focus on handing power back to schools, back to school leaders – recognising that you are the ones best placed to make the right decisions for your pupils, your communities.

It's when you give good people the power to make their own decisions that you unleash their creativity, allow them to drive improvements based on what they know works.

To this end we have opened hundreds of new Free Schools, drawing in talent and expertise from different groups and backgrounds, giving local communities and parents more freedom and choice, so every child can go to a good local school that suits their needs.

Take the Reach Academy, Feltham, a small school set up in an area of high deprivation by a group of teachers who felt that pupils don't always flourish in larger educational settings.

The size of the school allows teachers to work closely with parents and pupils they have high expectations for what every child can achieve. And the results are impressive, Ofsted rated the school 'outstanding' in 2014, and the school was one of the top performing schools nationally for progress in 2017.

We have also helped many more schools become an academy and join a Multi Academy Trust.

The vision behind Multi Academy Trusts is a simple one. It's about schools coming together to achieve more than they can on their own.

Whereas in the past schools could be trapped in poorly-performing Local Authorities that lacked the capacity to help them improve. Now there is real choice for schools – they're not just prisoners of their geography they can join a Multi Academy Trust and get the support they need to improve.

And the support they need to innovate.

Take WISE Academies in the North East, which – since 2012 – has taken on nine sponsored academies all of which previously had significant performance concerns.

This trust has reduced teacher workload through more efficient lesson planning and the creation of shared learning resources they have introduced new ways of teaching such as maths mastery techniques brought over from Singapore.

What is the result? Every school that has been inspected since joining the trust has been judged as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’.

Going back further, there are schools like King Solomon Academy, which opened as a new academy as part of the Ark network in 2007.

Serving a highly diverse community in one of the most economically disadvantaged wards in London, Ark King Solomon has twice been judged ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. While the Academy’s Progress 8 scores in 2016 and 2017 were among the best in the country.

Are there examples of trusts where things have gone wrong and children have been let down? Yes.

Should we accept that? No, not for a moment. Rare as these cases are, I’ll be talking more about how we prevent them from happening again in a moment.

[Political content redacted]

Each and every year there are new examples of leading Multi Academy Trusts turning around languishing schools and improving results.

And, in addition, we’re seeing trailblazing schools and school trusts seizing the chance to innovate. It should not surprise us that the majority of academy schools choose to become so.

But let’s step back a moment. What would happen if this was reversed? And we took power away from heads and school leaders?

[Political content redacted]

At the end of key stage 4, pupils in secondary free schools have made more progress on average than pupils in other types of state-funded schools.

Today, in the Academy Programme, more than half a million children now study in a good or outstanding sponsored academy, which typically replaced underperforming schools. Of the schools taken out of local authority control and made into a sponsored academy, by the end of last year, 65 per cent of those which had been inspected saw their grades improve from inadequate to either good or outstanding.

The other great thing about our system today is that it addresses failure. In the past, schools that failed were allowed to stay under local authority control for far too long. The academies changed all that.

[Political content redacted]

Consider Beaver Green Primary School in Ashford, Kent – a school judged Inadequate by Ofsted in 2013 and with a long history of underperformance. It became an academy in 2015 and last year the school was Ofsted-rated Good in all areas, with the Early Years Provision being rated as outstanding.

Or how about Newfield Secondary School in Sheffield – it was inadequate from 2006 until October 2010.

But when the school became an academy it really started to improve.

And it was inspected in March 2017 for the first time as an academy and was judged Good.

What I hope is clear from me is that my strategy is to trust you to get on with the job.

Let me give you an example. Take mobile phones.

We heard a couple of months ago how France would be banning mobile phones in schools.

Please be in no doubt what I think about mobile phones.

I firmly believe that kids in schools should not be on their phones. I strongly support schools that ban phones.

But when people asked me if I was going to follow the example of France and impose a national ban – I said no.

Because that's autonomy in practice. Heads know best how to run their schools and achieve the objectives they want without any unintended consequences. And meanwhile we have given teachers the powers to confiscate phones if necessary, and also to investigate cyber bullying that goes on beyond the school gates.

There are other areas where I want to proactively stress schools' autonomy.

One thing I've realised doing this job is that too often schools get told that my department or Ofsted expect them to follow the latest fads and fashions in the sector, no matter how time-consuming for teachers and how little evidence there is that they actually benefit the child...

I'm talking about things like excessive progress monitoring, annotated seating plans, triple marking, deep marking, DIRT marking, colour coded marking, you-name-it marking. All things that have added, quite unnecessarily, to teacher workload over the years.

That's why I asked Professor Becky Allen to chair a workload advisory group, to understand why schools are drowning in data and make recommendations to change this. Their report will be published soon, and will set out actions to give schools greater flexibility in the choices they make about how data is

used.

And that's why Amanda Spielman, myself and others recently made a video stressing that schools are free to follow their own judgement when it comes to lesson plans, the data they collect, the marking policies. I say it again: you don't need to do any of this for me, for DfE, for Ofsted.

So what next for our school system?

Earlier in the year I launched our latest round of applications to become a free school – specifically targeting areas where there is a real demand for good schools.

And yet again we've had a great deal of interest... I'm looking forward to launching the next wave soon.

And from Monday we will start receiving bids to open special and alternative provision free schools. We are also inviting applications from our best universities to open new maths schools.

In 2015, there were around 3,200 Academies and Free Schools in Multi Academy Trusts. We have now around 6,200 this year and I think that's a trend which will continue. In the last 12 months, we have received 600 applications to convert to an academy.

At the same time there will still be diversity – this is one of the strengths of our education system.

Ultimately a good school is a good school – and that's what we're encouraging, whether academies and free schools, the maintained sector, comprehensives, grammar schools, faith schools and more.

We're also encouraging more people from different professions and backgrounds to sign up to be governors and trustees.

We have already had some success in recruiting trustees from business and industry through our Academy Ambassadors programme to sit on boards.

And in June I issued a call to arms, urging individuals to sign up, and their employers to let them... At the same time the National Governance Association launched their Everyone on Board campaign.

And since then we've seen the number of people registering their interest to be a governor through our Inspiring Governance programme double – with over 200 signing up every month.

I also want to say a few words about accountability.

Of course, autonomy can never be absolute. Otherwise we're talking about autocracy.

Clearly, accountability remains vital.

And, as I said earlier, children only have one chance at an education – they all deserve the best.

That's why we have Ofsted, inspections and performance measures.

We now have a better assessment system for schools.

Whereas once we measured a school's performance by its A-C pupils – now, through progress 8, everyone's progress counts, everyone's performance is measured.

This stops a disproportionate focus on the C/D borderline, to the detriment of others at both ends of the scale.

And it's fairer to those schools with the challenging intakes. It properly captures the progress they actually make on behalf of their pupils – by taking into account where they started.

There's still improvements we can make.

First and foremost, I don't want our accountability system to stifle schools and drive workload – I want it to be supportive, helping schools that need it to improve, intervening only where there's failure, and leaving the rest to get on with it.

To this end, I recently published a statement setting out key principles for how I see the accountability system working in the future, which we will be consulting on shortly. In the future, an Ofsted Inadequate judgement alone would lead to hard action to convert a Local Authority maintained school to an academy. And schools will no longer face those visits from Regional Schools Commissioners' advisers that can feel a lot like inspections.

On those rare occasions when a school is failing – be in no doubt – we will intervene fast and take the serious action necessary. We will also offer support to schools that need it sooner – preventing failure before it happens.

What about MAT accountability?

Trusts clearly have an increasingly important role in our system and we need to make sure that our system of oversight and decision-making keeps up with this. Of course, as this audience is aware, we already hold MATs to account in many ways.

When it comes to finances, academies are in fact more transparent in their reporting than other schools, for example independent scrutiny of annual accounts.

It's because we have this transparency we know all about it when there are failures – and we are well-placed to take swift action.

For example, recently strengthening the requirements in the Academies Financial Handbook on related party transactions and executive pay.

There's more we can do however. I want you to have confidence that our assessments are transparent and fair. And I want to make sure that schools and parents can easily access vital information about a particular trust, and the performance of the system as a whole.

I have also been clear that I do not want to introduce anything that would create more workload for teachers, leaders, and governors.

It's about getting the balance right between effective assessment – without imposing new burdens with little benefit.

That is why I am working with the sector to figure out how this will work.

In particular I want to hear proposals from MAT and school leaders; your views are crucial.

So during this term we will be getting out and talking to the sector, unions and, importantly, school leaders themselves. We are convening roundtables and meetings with trust chairs and CEOs across the country.

I know that CST are thinking about what a new model of MAT assessment might look like and will be sharing that with us, so as members I encourage you to contribute to that.

Freedom. Diversity. Accountability.

That is the school system I believe in.

And I think it's the system you believe in too.

I have met many headteachers and many school trusts since taking on this job including those serving some of our most disadvantaged communities. And I know they are driven by a deep sense of mission and a moral desire to provide equality of opportunity to all pupils, wherever they are born and whatever their background.

To them, to you, I have a simple message: thank you.

Looking back on all the reforms we've made these last eight years – we've come a long way. In particular, narrowing the attainment gap between children from different backgrounds. And yet – that gap is still too wide.

Some places have seen dramatic gains, but others still need extra help.

We must keep going, spreading opportunity to the parts of the country where children are still let down by the depth and breadth of education available. Every child should be able to go to a great school.

[Political content redacted]

I want us to move forwards, together, working with organisations like yours. Listening to you and, yes, being challenged by you.

Working together to offer every child a world-class education.

Thank you.