

Speech: Justine Greening: education at the heart of our plan for Britain

A United Kingdom that rises to the challenge

Thank you very much indeed Francis [Campbell, Vice Chancellor of St Mary's University] for that introduction. Good morning everyone. It's really a pleasure to be here today and I want to thank St Mary's University for welcoming us here today. It seemed like a great place to come, because not only is it a place that is training the teachers of the future, but researchers here have been doing important analysis of the educational outcomes of young people in our schools, especially those that come from families struggling to make ends meet. And that's particularly one of the things I want to talk about today.

But the backdrop to all of this is that this is a government that is responding to a fundamental truth. That our people have voted for change. They voted for a fairer society – one that works for everyone. Because I think too many of us felt that the link between the work they put in and the rewards they received was somehow weakening. Too many people felt that this country – their country – wasn't working for them.

This feeling didn't happen overnight. But I think the referendum was a catalyst – a moment of clarity for the country. And whatever you may think yourself, the bottom line is that the old status quo did not work for enough of our people. It wasn't sustainable. And that is why we need to change it.

Following that referendum, we are now months into a period of national change, as Britain leaves the European Union. And we will build a United Kingdom that rises to that challenge – but, most importantly, grasps the opportunities our future brings too. I believe we can be successful. I believe we will be successful. But it won't just happen. We need the plan and we need the means.

And the Prime Minister has set out our plan for Britain.

A strong economy – the foundation on which everything depends. Providing the careers, the opportunities, the products and services we need, the tax receipts that our public services rely on. And it is a strong economy. Our unemployment rate is now less than half that of the Eurozone area.

A global Britain – playing our full role on the international stage. Being a voice for the values that British people have fought and died for – even on our own soil, as we tragically saw a few weeks ago. The values of democracy, of equality, of the rule of law.

At home we want a united nation. Because we're a unique team, with no match anywhere in the world – something I have seen clearly as I've travelled all over that world during the last 4 years. The unique combination of our United

Kingdom. The way it's led our country and our democracy. The way together we have adapted to change, to become greater than the sum of our parts – this is why we have succeeded. And this is part of why we will succeed in the future.

But the final part of the plan for Britain is a fairer society – a society based on merit. And delivering a fairer society surely must start with education and our schools – making sure that our children and young people can do their very best and reach their potential, wherever they're growing up. That's the means by which we build a better country. It's how we build a better Britain. In short, we are the means. Our country's people. Each and every one of us.

Some of the most vivid memories I have in life are about opportunities. Me in a telephone box in Devon. It looks pretty around. But it matters to me, that telephone box, because it's the telephone box I rang from to get my A level results. I screamed with delight when I heard that I'd got the results I needed. We went to the pub to celebrate. I knew it would open up the world to me. I believe we can build that system here.

Opportunity is about how we translate hope into something real – something concrete. So for me opportunity is the most precious commodity in this world. Our strong economy is vital, because it's the opportunity engine of our country. But we now truly need to make it a country where everyone has an equal shot at taking advantage of those opportunities being created. This is a government that wants more opportunity for more people – and more equality of opportunity. And that means unlocking our children's potential.

Now, I think back to those countries that I spent so much time visiting over recent years, the people I met and the talents I saw unlocked by education. And I think – no single country had it right actually. There isn't a country out there that has found the formula to unlock every talent of every person. But if a country could do that – if it really could build an education system to realise the potential of every one of its people, if it had an economy and businesses that could fully harness that potential – then what a country it would be. It would be unbeatable. That's what this government wants for our country – and in doing so it will be a country that reflects the values of British people. And, I hope, a beacon to the rest of the world.

I believe we can build that education system that unlocks the talents of all our people here in Britain. We've got the right ingredients: expert teachers, determined to unlock every young person's potential. I have spent much time with them in recent months. A society that believes in fairness and businesses that now more than ever understand how education and skills drive growth. We can unleash the wealth of latent talent that we have on this island – and become a powerful, modern, confident economy. A country that works for everyone.

Our reforms have taken steps to improve quality and diversity

Our country has been on a long journey on education – not just on improving

the quality of our schools, but on giving parents real choice where before there was none. When I was growing up there was no real choice at all. You got what you were given. I went to my local comprehensive school because everyone did, because everybody did. I went to x and y schools. And in this system some people got a good education. I was lucky – I had great teachers who taught me, encouraged me and inspired me. That got me to that red phone box in Devon years later. People never forget great teachers, because the impact they have on our lives goes beyond that of other people that we will go on to meet. But some people – and some places – have been left behind. The schools they went to and are going to weren't good enough. We can never accept the randomness of a postcode lottery in education if we are to succeed as a country.

That's why we will keep pursuing our ambitious reforms. On what children are taught, on making sure they are taught well, and on how schools provide them with the knowledge and skills they and our businesses need for success in modern Britain. That's why we're pursuing a new gold standard in curriculum and assessment, together with an expectation that the vast majority of young people will study the EBacc subjects – this is an academic core of subjects – that keep their options open for young people. And we are steadily strengthening the teaching profession with high-quality qualifications and standards, an increased focus on CPD of teachers supported by a new professional body – the College of Teaching – to bring the profession together.

We want all our children taught in good and outstanding schools. So we have an academies programme that hones in on inadequate and coasting schools – to ensure they improve. And our reforms are working – 1.8 million more good and outstanding schools for children since 2010, 1.8 million more children getting a better start and a better chance to realise their potential. Created all over the country to benefit children from all backgrounds. And we're also continuing to introduce different and better options for parents too, because, overwhelmingly, we believe it is parents who are best placed to make the right decision for their child. More than this, we also believe that parents better able to get the right schools for their children is part of how we improve the system as a whole.

We want schools that work for everyone. And that is what we are already delivering. Yesterday's announcement of our latest wave of new free schools proves that. These are new schools which will be built across our country, creating the extra school places our children will need – but also, beyond that, a real choice, a real diversity of schools.

In the future we will have comprehensive schools and grammar schools. Schools which focus on maths, on music and other specialisms, and schools for young people who want to pursue and develop their technical talents. So this free schools programme is vital if we are to make sure that parents continue to have the education choices that they want for their children,

We need an education system that works for everyone, including ordinary working families

But we know that there is more to do – and alongside creating a real diversity of schools, we have rightly focused on the most disadvantaged children and young people. I believe all have a talent – the potential to succeed and have a great career. But look at the gap in attainment.

Less well-off children enter school behind their wealthier peers already.

And once at school they fall further behind – because they're less likely to go to a good school.

They're less likely to then go to university – and even if they get there, they go on to earn lower incomes than their advantaged peers, even if they're in the same top jobs.

Yet they are more likely to do further education – which we believe has been neglected and underfunded for decades.

So we should never accept an education system that is so tilted against the disadvantaged. So we remain absolutely committed to supporting these children and young people, not least with transformational long-term policies like the pupil premium, and opportunity areas to increase social mobility.

But we believe it's not just disadvantaged children and young people that our education system can deliver much more for. This government will not lose sight of other children, from ordinary working families. This government believes we have not done enough to support them – partly because they do not qualify under our existing measures of disadvantage. The danger is that they've ended up off the radar. But we are determined to also have them at the heart of our thinking. And at the heart of our plan for Britain.

The Prime Minister has been clear – if we are to build a country that works for everyone, we need to do more for young people from these families. Families on modest incomes, who are being let down by a shortage of good schools. Statistically, they are families that tend to live outside the inner cities – of course, it has been inner cities that have been the focus of many of our education initiatives – and it has been the inner cities that have commonly been the focus of education initiatives. Instead, they live in our suburbs and our coastal areas, mostly outside Greater London, in many towns in the North of England. But if these young people can do better, then our whole country will do better.

If these children received the same grades as their wealthier peers at the end of secondary school, then we'd have thousands more pupils better equipped to do well in later life. At primary school, we'd have thousands more reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths – gaining the knowledge and skills that privileged groups take for granted.

If the schools these children attended were as good as their wealthier peers, we'd have nearly 100,000 more outstanding school places for them.

And so, as well as our disadvantaged young people – those furthest away from the level playing field of opportunity – we need to help these children achieve their full potential too.

When I was growing up, there was a phrase I often heard: “make do”. I absolutely hated that. I heard it, but I didn’t want to just make do. I wanted more than that. Well, this is a government that believes that everyday ordinary working families shouldn’t have to “make do”. We believe they deserve better than that. Because ordinary working families are the backbone of our economy, of our country. They so often embody our national traits and values. Hugely generous. Fair by nature. Passionate about family, community and country. And – as I know from my own family in Rotherham – above all, hard working. Not working hard for recognition. But because of an instinctive pride in having independence – for the means to take care of your nearest and dearest. And a cast-iron commitment to do whatever you can do to make sure that the prospects of our future generations are brighter than your own. That’s what matters.

These families work hard, and sometimes – as I know from my own childhood – there is so much ‘stuff’ that needs to be done, they don’t have time to ask why there isn’t more help – there isn’t time to have a say about what should be better. My earliest memories of politics are of my Dad shouting at the TV when the news was on – that was him having his say. But, do you know what? These families shouldn’t have to grow sharp elbows to get the public services they deserve – from the country that they support and serve day to day. This government knows that. This government knows that we need to repair the link between hard work these families put in and the rewards they receive – we want to build a fairer society for them. That’s the national change that we will pursue as Britain leaves the European Union. That’s part of the plan for Britain.

What gets measured gets done

But when it comes to their children, we currently don’t have a way to identify them within our education system – and to track whether they have access to good school places or have good educational outcomes. We don’t have the nuts and bolts – the information – we need to make sure we can be a government for these families. There’s an old adage – what gets measured gets done. And this government is focused on getting things done. So yesterday, my department launched a technical consultation about how we can systematically understand a wider – but still battling – group of people. Where they are and how they do.

To be clear, this isn’t about creating brand-new labels for our families and our children. It isn’t about singling out some for support – whilst leaving others alone. Because we know families are different, not just materially and financially, but in the way they identify themselves – in their own perceptions. But we do want to start to provide a clearer analysis of the situation. Of how these children of ordinary working people are faring in our education system. And for measuring how our wider reforms can do better for these families – and so better for the country.

These families face day-to-day challenges. All the children in these families will have talent. I believe talent is spread evenly across our country. No one area, or group, has a monopoly on this country's talent. But you wouldn't know that from looking at our education results. Nearly a million young people still attend inadequate schools or schools that require improvement. This represents a million young people who still don't have the same opportunity to find their talent and do as well as their counterparts do in better schools. And children from ordinary working families are more likely to be amongst this million children.

More schools that work for everyone

Fundamentally, these children need more good schools. That will be at the heart of my forthcoming white paper – 'schools that work for everyone' – for the first time we want to properly knit together the different parts of our education system, so its constituent parts can work together to raise attainment as a whole, collectively. We believe that universities, independent schools and faith schools can have a real role in creating better options for parents. And I believe that selection – in new 21st-century state grammar schools – will add to the options available to young people, to truly help make the most of their talents.

I don't accept the arguments from those who critique grammars and selection whilst simultaneously ignoring the views of parents. On the one hand, they call for no new grammar schools, but on the other, they have nothing to say about the grammars we do have. And they certainly aren't listening to the choices of parents, when we know how oversubscribed grammars are. We are listening. Many parents – from ordinary backgrounds – believe in the chance to send their children to a grammar school. That's the kind of school that they think suits their child. So they get a great start. We want parents to make the right choice for their child. So we need a diverse range of schools to cater for the needs and talents of all children. Because you don't make this country better by taking away opportunities from children that deserve them. You do the opposite. You level up. You extend opportunities to those that haven't got them. That's why this government believes it must be parents and communities who have the final say on whether to have a grammar school in their area.

And grammar schools should not just be for one better-off group in society to attend. We want to see more children from disadvantaged families getting into grammars – that's absolutely vital. I welcome that many grammar schools are now changing their admissions code to give a priority of places to these children – I want all of them to follow this example. We certainly will not lose sight of the fact that we want grammars to achieve more for disadvantaged children.

But we also shouldn't lose sight of the fact that many young people from an ordinary working-class background already attend our existing grammar schools. In fact, as our technical consultation shows, it's already the same proportion of them that attend non-selective schools. It reinforces that ordinary working families do value this choice of education for their

children. Grammars do work for other groups in our society, not just the wealthy. And so, the new schools that we will create will support young people from every background, not the privileged few. Young people on free schools meals – those eligible for pupil premium. Young people from ordinary working families that are struggling to get by. I want these new schools to work for everyone. This will be a new model of grammars, truly open to all – we will insist on that. And it will reflect the choices of local parents and communities. And we will ensure they support and partner with other schools in their communities – reaching out and playing a role in lifting standards well beyond their own school gates. Just as we want our universities and our independent schools to provide even greater support and partnership in the communities that they are part of too. That is how we build capacity through our whole school system.

Because we should never accept that education is a zero-sum game. Great heads, great teachers and great schools can and are raising performance for the whole community – not just their own schools – by sharing expertise and providing support, so young people in all schools can benefit from a stronger, closer-knit education system. And young people from all schools can have a good education, with an academic core, to help unlock their talents.

There is then space for everyone to succeed in this system. And this is not our whole education approach by any means. We are reforming education post-16 by lifting the cap on university places. And with the help of top employers we are reforming our technical education – injecting investment, standards and quality – so that young people who are technically gifted have a world-class route to a great career. That's why the CBI called our March budget "a breakthrough budget for skills".

In Britain there will always be room for talent. Unlocking talent is how we build all of our futures. And we will build an education system that unlocks that talent in every one of our young people.

A country that works for everyone

This is a bold plan for transforming education in Britain. Everyone needs to play their part. Not just our education sector – our teachers, school leaders, lecturers. Our schools and universities. But also our employers, top businesses. This government.

This is not an easy mission. But the potential gains are huge – for young people and for Britain. And if we unlocked the talent of every young person, it would have a huge impact on productivity and the economy.

That's why education is such a crucial part of our industrial strategy.

It's why education is at the heart of our plan for Britain.

A true meritocracy. Opportunity as the glue that brings the country together. A strong, modern economy facing out to the world. A global Britain that lives up to its values.

Because, in spite of their circumstances, everyone has a talent. And when we recognise the potential of every person, we recognise the potential of our country. And when we can finally capitalise on every talent, Britain really will be a country that works for everyone.

Thank you.