

Speech: Nick Gibb welcomes teachers to international conference

It is a pleasure to be here in Lisbon at the ISTP 2018, a year on from the successful and fruitful ISTP 2017 in Edinburgh co-hosted by the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments.

Last year, we agreed to promote greater equity through commitments to ensure that:

- Every pupil has the opportunity to achieve their potential, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- We raise the status of the teaching profession; and
- Teaching is firmly grounded in high quality research.

Over the course of the last year, England has continued to make strides in these important areas.

In 2010, the government introduced the English Baccalaureate – known as the EBacc. This is a school performance measure rather than a qualification. It is designed to increase the number of pupils taking core academic GCSEs – English, maths, sciences, a language and either history or geography. These GCSEs provide pupils with the broad academic grounding up to the age of 16 that they need to be successful, whatever route they choose to pursue post-16.

Many countries represented here today will consider it axiomatic that pupils study these subjects to at least the age of 16. But in England in 2010, only 1 in 5 pupils were taking this combination of academic GCSEs. That figure is now almost 2 in 5. The government is ambitious for this figure to rise further – to 90% of year 10 pupils studying the EBacc by 2025.

Already, there are promising signs. This year, we saw the highest proportion of disadvantaged pupils, those who receive free school meals, pupils with special educational needs and pupils with English as an additional language taking these core academic GCSEs.

Not only this, results show that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has shrunk at primary and secondary school. Since 2011, the attainment gap at age 11 has decreased by 10.5%. Whilst at 16, it has shrunk by 10% since 2011.

The government is raising standards for all pupils, but the tide is rising fastest for those who need it most.

Academies and free schools – which now make up over 70% of secondary schools and over 25% of primary schools – operate independently of local government.

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Dixons Trinity Academy – a free school based in Bradford – achieved extraordinary results with its first set of GCSEs, placing it in the 10 top schools in England for the progress achieved by its pupils. Strikingly, the progress score for disadvantaged pupils was higher than for that of their more affluent peers.

But the success of the free school and academy movement is not confined to individual schools. The growth of multi-academy trusts has seen excellence spread across schools. Multi-academy trusts are combinations of academies, from 2 or 3, to as many as 50 or 60 academies, all reporting to one group of independent trustees.

Made up of a combination of schools that have been taken out of local authority control because of that poor performance, which we call sponsored academies; and high performing schools that have voluntarily opted out of local authority control, which we call converter academies; and newly created academies, which we call free schools. These high performing multi-academy trusts demonstrate what it is possible to achieve when power is placed in the hands of high-performing, competitive trusts.

Irrespective of the history of the schools they run, these multi-academy trusts have generated excellent academic results for the pupils they serve, as they compete with other multi-academy trusts in terms of their reputation for academic rigour.

So, the clear advantage of taking schools away from local authority control, is that for the first time, schools are now accountable to their trustees rather than to bureaucracies and there is genuine competition between groups of schools which forces them to respond to the concerns of parents for higher standards of behaviour and stronger academic results.

Thanks to a forensic approach to curriculum design and the implementation of evidence-based approaches to managing poor behaviour, the Inspiration Trust and the Harris Federation – two of the best performing multi-academy trusts – have conclusively demonstrated that all pupils can achieve – whether they live in coastal Norfolk or inner-city London.

They demonstrate that neither the socio-economic context of pupils nor the historic reputation of a school need be a barrier to excellence. And – just as importantly – they provide a model for ensuring that all children succeed. As with Dixons Trinity, schools in these leading multi academy chains are characterised by knowledge-rich curricula, high behavioural expectations and evidence-based teacher-led instruction.

As well as providing the freedom and autonomy to leading free schools and multi-academy trusts, the government is determined to support and empower

teachers to raise standards in their schools. The recently closed consultation on how to improve career support and progression for teachers was designed in tandem with the profession. We will respond to the proposals outlined in that consultation – including how we can take forward plans for an Early Career Content Framework – later in the spring. And we will continue to work closely with teachers and teacher representatives on these proposals.

Another key strand of the government's work to support and empower teachers is the government's priority of reducing teacher workload. Teachers should be freed from spending hours on marking and entering progress-data, particularly when evidence suggests these do not improve pupil outcomes.

And headteachers need the security of knowing that their autonomy won't be compromised by rogue school inspectors. That is why the government – in tandem with Ofsted, the schools inspectorate – has been clear on what inspectors will, and will not, ask when they visit schools.

We are also committed to clarifying the roles of different actors within the system, including what we call Regional Schools Commissioners, the 8 regional offices of the Department for Education. In order to provide teachers and headteachers with the opportunity to innovate and raise standards, they need to know that the accountability system within which they work is fair, transparent and – when needs be – supportive rather than punitive.

The government has played an active role in raising standards in schools and in empowering and supporting teachers. But, it is by standing back and promoting teacher voices, that the government has helped to make the most progress in promoting evidence-based teaching.

There is still a long way to go in empowering all teachers with the knowledge they need. But the success of ResearchED – a series of teacher-led research conferences founded by the teacher Tom Bennett now spanning 4 continents – shows teachers' appetite for research. Tom Bennett [wrote recently](#) about the movement of teachers who are dedicating their Saturday's to discussing and sharing research with one another. Writing powerfully and metaphorically he penned the following:

My ambition is that we start to drive this voluntary professional development, which then cascades back into schools and starts conversations that starts sparks in classrooms that catch fire and burn down dogma. That initial teacher training makes evidence its foundation (where it does not do so already), platforming the best of what we know rather than perpetuating the best of what we prefer. For new teachers to be given skills to discern good evidence from bad. For that to bleed eventually into leadership and from there into the structures that govern us.

But time and again, teachers run up against entrenched views held by those in positions of authority. For example, late last year, an academic from Durham University called the government's promotion of systematic synthetic phonics

[‘seriously flawed’](#); flying in the face of decades of evidence from around the world that phonics is the most effective method for teaching children to read. He went on to claim that drawing on scientific evidence to inform policy making in science “can be especially dangerous”.

Thankfully, the results from the PIRLS international reading tests came out within a month of these comments. This assessment of 9 and 10 year olds’ reading comprehension showed that England had risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016, thanks to a statistically significant rise in our average score. And low-attaining pupils had gained most showing again that the government is raising standards for all, but the tide is rising quickest for those who need it most.

These results were a vindication of the government’s evidence-based insistence on the use of systematic synthetic phonics in teaching children to read.

Too often in education, academics use their positions of authority to ignore the evidence and promote their own beliefs. For too long, education has suffered from putting belief over evidence.

As policy makers, if we are to empower teachers to pursue evidence-based approaches, we must confront the evidence as we find it, not as we would wish it to be.

So, when we come to discuss so-called ‘pedagogies of the future’, I hope that we will treat unfounded claims sceptically. Instead, we should discuss the data from PISA 2015, which showed that in all but three countries, higher levels of teacher-directed instruction led to significantly higher science results. And we should interrogate the data showing that in the majority of countries, pupils reporting higher levels of enquiry-based instruction achieved significantly worse results.

As we would expect of teachers, data and evidence should be the starting point for our conversation, not something to fit with our pre-existing conceptions.

But we must not ignore these conceptions. These too must be interrogated and the nuance explored. The caricature of teacher-led instruction as turgid and dull must be dispelled. Rosenshine’s [Principles of Instruction](#) make clear that teacher-led instruction should be interactive. These evidence-based principles suggest that teachers, amongst other things:

- ask a large number of questions and check pupil responses; and
- provide models and worked examples.

And the evidence from PISA 2015 supports these findings. According to the data, the most successful science classrooms were those where teachers explained scientific ideas, discussed pupil responses to questions and clearly demonstrated an idea.

Rosenshine’s principles, which draw heavily on cognitive science, are backed up by the PISA 2015 data.

Reflecting on the relationship between researchers and teachers in the conclusion to his 2002 essay [Classroom Research and Cargo Cults](#), E. D. Hirsch – the educationalist who has most influenced my thinking – stressed the need for this relationship to evolve.

Drawing on the comments of a colleague, he laid out his vision for cognitive science research and teaching practice to mirror the relationship between biochemistry and medical science.

In England, it is clear that schools are beginning to take this ambition to heart. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), whose General Secretary Carl Ward is here today, and PTE, Parents and Teachers for Excellence, a pressure group calling for more subject knowledge in the curriculum – and whose CEO Mark Lehain is also here – together they organised a pamphlet to support teachers to adopt a knowledge-rich curriculum.

In this pamphlet, titled [The Question of Knowledge](#), Luke Sparkes – headteacher of Dixons Trinity Academy – explained how that school uses cognitive science to inform their curriculum planning:

A knowledge-based curriculum is about harnessing the power of cognitive science, identifying each marginal gain and acting upon it; having the humility to keep refining schemes of work, long term plans and generating better assessments.

Examples such as this show that Tom Bennett is right; teachers demanding better evidence is slowly changing education.

Thank you.