

Barnardo's lecture series

Believe in
children



Barnardo's

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

29 April 2009

It's a great privilege for me to be here tonight giving the final lecture in this series.

The title of my lecture is 'Ensuring Every Child Can Succeed'.

And I want to talk about what more we can do ensure that those children who face additional barriers – including deprivation and poverty but also a special educational need or disability – are all given the support that they need to fulfil their potential.

In many ways, this is the ideal audience for this lecture.

Because for over 140 years now, Barnardo's has worked tirelessly to improve opportunities for young people.

It was to help the homeless, neglected and until then largely forgotten children living on the streets of the East End that Thomas Barnardo set up that first children's home over 140 years ago.

And in the decades since, thousands of the most vulnerable members of our society were offered not just safety and protection but also received love and encouragement in the homes that were run by Barnardo's.

Today, Barnardo's is still playing a vital role:

- as a campaigning organisation – challenging those who use the terrible and appalling actions of a tiny minority of our young people to demonise the vast majority of young people who work hard, play by the rules and are good citizens;

- influencing policy – as the powerful 'Second Chances' film showed, we do need a strong vocational offer to those young people for whom school is not the right option as part of raising the education and training age to 18;

- and as a service provider – as one of the early adopters of ContactPoint, we value the work that you are doing with us to ensure that all those who work with children have the information they need to help protect children who may be at risk.

And there is no better embodiment of Barnardo's tradition than your Chief Executive, Martin Narey.

You only have to look back over the past few weeks to see why:

- earlier this week, the HMIP report on children in custody told us that there are still real challenges to improve outcomes for children in custody – but also that there has been steady progress in recent years and much of that has been down to Martin's work both with Barnardo's and previously as the Head of the Prison Service;

www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's adheres to the Fundraising Promise and Fundraising Standards Board guidelines.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605

- Martin has challenged us not be afraid to take difficult decisions about taking children into care if they're also the right ones to keep them safe;

- but above all, Martin has led the way in challenging us to go further and faster to end child poverty.

Martin has never pulled his punches with me.

He has always been very clear that he wants us to invest more money in ending child poverty – including in the run-up to this Budget.

But let me also say that his support and campaigning:

- has helped lift 600,000 children out of relative poverty and halved the numbers living in absolute poverty;

- and also helped to secure the funding for the further measures that we announced in the Budget and Pre-Budget Report.

And it is because we want to show that our determination matches Martin's – the End Child Poverty campaign's – commitment that we are now enshrining our child poverty commitments in law.

I do believe the Bill is important because it is based on the moral purpose that unites our head teachers and teachers, social workers, health workers, voluntary workers and all those who work with children and young people in our country.

And that is our belief that:

- every child has potential and can succeed with the right help and support;

- and no barrier should ever be allowed to hold a child back from fulfilling their potential.

That is the vision of our Children's Plan.

Previous lectures in this series addressed how we can remove some of the remaining barriers to achieving our Children's Plan vision by:

- promoting greater social mobility so that every child has the opportunity to succeed;

- helping children who have got into trouble to get back on track;

- and supporting those children and families who come to our country seeking asylum so that they are not denied the good start in life that they too deserve.

I want to continue that theme in my lecture tonight.

Before I went to speak at the Association of School and College Leaders annual conference last month, I was challenged by their General Secretary, John Dunford, to use my speech to set out my priorities.

It did, I have to say, come as a bit of a surprise when he quickly added: "make it a short list".

I've always been of the view that being ambitious and having a short list don't always go hand-in-hand.

Just look at our Children's Plan document setting out our ten year vision – it was 170 pages long.

And the one year progress report – 232 pages long.

But I did go there and set out my priorities for schools and children's services.

And there were only two:

- first, I want to continue to raise standards in schools – so that parents in every community can have a choice of good local schools;
- and second, I want to do everything we can to break the longstanding link between deprivation and poor attainment that has scarred our country for too long – so that we can break cycles of poverty and ensure that every child and young person can be happy, healthy and fulfil their potential.

These are the things that I believe are at the heart of our shared moral purpose to help every child succeed.

And these are the things that I want to speak about tonight.

First, it is fashionable in some sections of the media to talk about declining standards across our schools system.

I say that's nonsense.

Over the past decade, the fact is that standards have dramatically improved in our schools.

Today:

- over 100,000 more children now leave primary school secure in English and maths at level 4 than a decade ago;
- almost half of young people now achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths compared to just over a third in 1997;
- and the number of secondary schools below our basic benchmark of at least 30% of pupils getting five good GCSEs including English and maths has gone from over half in 1997 to one in seven today.

And to those who say that standards are falling or that we're dumbing down:

- we now have an independent regulator of standards in Ofqual;
- our curriculum is stretching and inspiring pupils in state schools around the country more than ever before;
- and we have gone from being below average in the world to above average – a view that was backed up by the TIMSS study on science and maths.

Instead of knocking them, let's congratulate our best schools for their hard work, their dedication and their success.

We do know of course that there is still further to go until:

- every child arrives at reception ready to learn and is secure in the basics when they leave primary school;
- every young person gets the qualifications and skills they need;
- every school is a good school;
- and deprivation isn't a barrier to any child or young person achieving their potential.

These are big ambitions.

www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's adheres to the Fundraising Promise and Fundraising Standards Board guidelines.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605

We are committed to doing all we can by:

- intensifying our focus on personalised learning with our one-to-one tuition and catch-up programmes and the greater focus that schools can now place on progress in Years 7 and 8;
- ensuring that the accountability system recognises and rewards all of the work that schools do to stretch the brightest pupils and give extra support to those who have fallen behind through our new Report Card;
- and providing the extra support that's needed to ensure that every school is a good school by investing £400m in our National Challenge programme to help all schools get above our benchmark of at least 30% of pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths.

National Challenge has been controversial – mainly because of the way it was initially reported as being about labelling schools as failing.

I've always said that at least a third of the schools below our benchmark have great leadership, are already improving and will get above the target with very little if any extra support.

A further third will get there with some support – and that's what we are providing.

And we have now agreed plans in all areas of the country where there are National Challenge schools – including where more radical solutions are also needed.

It is deliberately uncompromising.

Because I refuse to stand back and watch low attainment get entrenched.

Some people say it isn't the right approach.

They say National Challenge is about centralising our education system.

That's just not true.

Our approach is based on:

- strong local leadership that identifies where extra support is needed;
- providing that extra support;
- and above all, putting our great school leaders to work across our schools system;

Because that's what makes the biggest difference of all, not me pulling levers from Whitehall.

But it's also the case that where:

- underperformance has become entrenched;
- disadvantage is used as an excuse;
- and young people are being left to fail.

I make no apologies about saying that I will step in and demand improvement.

Because the alternative philosophy is to stand back, wait for free market forces to work so that parents vote with their feet and less successful schools slowly whither and decline, leaving many young people to a second-class education.

That's just not acceptable to me either.

It's certainly not what a progressive government should be about.

Others oppose National Challenge because they say that it's just not possible to raise standards in some schools in some communities.

They say that you just can't expect young people from around here to succeed.

I'm not prepared to accept those excuses either.

Of course it's harder in some schools and in some areas.

But it's because of our track-record of progress and the many examples of schools succeeding in the most challenging circumstances that I don't think we should accept these excuses.

The recent Ofsted report shows how 12 of our best state schools have, despite serving disproportionately disadvantaged communities, have achieved exceptional results and been rated as consistently outstanding.

We are also seeing huge progress made in many of the most disadvantaged areas through our Academies programme.

And the track-record of progress the many examples of schools succeeding through London Challenge shows that we don't have to accept these excuses.

In 2002, 39% of pupils in London achieved five good GCSEs including English and maths – compared to 40% across the country.

Today, 51% of pupils in London achieve that level – while the national average has risen to 48%.

And at this point, it is only right for me to pay tribute to Sir Mike Tomlinson, who will retire at the end of next month.

As Chief Advisor for London schools, Sir Mike has played a leading role in driving up standards in schools in the city and also in London Challenge.

And I'm pleased that he'll continue to work with us as Chair of our panel of National Challenge advisers.

But London Challenge isn't just about raising standards.

It's also about narrowing the gap between deprivation and attainment – which is my second priority and is probably the thing that can do more to break intergenerational cycles of poverty than anything else we can do.

We recently published two new evidence reports on deprivation and education called 'Breaking the Link: Everybody's Business'.

They show that over the past 10 years:

- faster progress has been made by the most deprived areas – 9 of the 20 most improved Local Authorities are in the most deprived areas of the country;

- and faster progress has also been made by schools with the highest proportion of pupils from disadvantaged areas – those with more than half their pupils on free school meals have seen a 19% rise in pupils achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths, compared to a 10% rise in schools that have the fewest pupils on free school meals.

www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's adheres to the Fundraising Promise and Fundraising Standards Board guidelines.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605

So at the area level and at the school level, we are making real progress.

But it is at the individual pupil level that the greatest challenge remains.

Again, there has been progress.

In primary schools:

- 20,000 more pupils on free school meals now get to level 4 in maths at the end of Key Stage 2 than ten years ago;
- their chance of success has increased from 38% to 60% - compared to 63% to 80% for pupils not on free school meals;
- and the gap has narrowed by 5% in maths;
- and it has also narrowed by 3% in English.

In secondary schools:

- the chance of a pupil on free school meals getting a good maths GCSE has increased from 25% to 35% over the past four years – compared to 53% to 61% for pupils not on free school meals;
- so the gap has narrowed by 2% in maths;
- it has also narrowed by 2% in English since 2004;
- and on the measure of five good GCSEs, the gap has narrowed by 4% since 2002.

So we know it can be done.

But there is still a long way to go because our evidence report also shows that:

- a pupil on free school meals is still only a third as likely to succeed at every Key Stage than a pupil not on free school meals;
- that gap is only just beginning to narrow;
- and we also know that many of the lowest achieving pupils on free school meals also have a special education need and therefore face an even steeper struggle to succeed.

But there was another very important finding in our evidence report.

While at primary level, there is a concentration of pupils on free school meals in those schools in the most deprived areas of the country, there is a much lower level of concentration of pupils on free school meals in secondary schools in the most deprived.

In fact, over a quarter of all pupils on free school meals are in secondary schools with below average levels of deprivation.

So breaking the link really is everybody's business – and that means schools in urban and rural areas, as well as in disadvantaged areas but also in relatively affluent areas too.

And the greatest challenge of all is actually in schools where average results are good and there are fewer pupils on free school meal but where the attainment gap is the biggest of all.

Indeed, the gap in the schools with the fewest pupils on free school meals is nearly four times bigger than the gap in schools with the most pupils on free school meals.

That's why – as well as National Challenge – we are offering more support and challenge to coasting schools that are above our benchmark and where outcomes on the whole look acceptable; but where they could be doing far more to stretch the most gifted and talented pupils and provide extra support to those pupils who start year 7 behind and are never able to catch up.

But to achieve our ambitions, we need to accelerate progress at the individual pupil level and ask ourselves whether we are doing all that we can:

- during the early years;
- while children are at school;
- across our wider children's services;
- and to ensure that a special educational need does not prevent any child from fulfilling their potential.

And let me take each of these points in turn.

First, we know that when a gap opens up during the early years, it can be extremely difficult to close.

That's why the support provided to families through SureStart children's centres is vital to helping children get off to the best start in life.

A decade ago, there were no children's centres.

Today, there are almost 3,000 serving communities around the country.

I believe that these are amongst the most important reforms that we have made.

And the next stage of our reforms is to legislate to enshrine in law our commitment to ensure there is a children's centre in every community.

But we know that when children do fall behind, they need extra support to catch up.

And a school is often the most important public institution in a child's life – so what more we do to support them is my second point by:

- intensifying our focus on personalised learning and tracking the progress of every child with our one-to-one tuition and catch-up programmes and the greater focus that schools can now place on progress in Years 7 and 8 – and it's encouraging that the research shows that, in just its first term, our Every Child Counts programme has already helped primary children make an average of a year's progress;
- taking forward a range of measures to strengthen parental engagement in their child's learning by ensuring that parents get more regular information about progress and that parents' voices are heard in schools;
- and encouraging more of our great heads to reach outside their own schools and collaborate with other schools in their communities to drive up standards.

But as well as good leadership, schools need an engaging curriculum that raises aspirations and supports the progress and wellbeing of every child.

I believe that our new Diplomas are the best opportunity we have ever had to break the old two-tier divide in our education system between academic and vocational learning.

www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's adheres to the Fundraising Promise and Fundraising Standards Board guidelines.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605

And tomorrow, we will be publishing Sir Jim Rose's review of the primary curriculum.

In his report, Sir Jim recognises that for primary school children raising standards goes hand in hand with improving a child's communication skills, their health and their wellbeing.

That's why he has recommended this is one of the six new areas of learning.

The new primary curriculum will slim down the existing 12 subjects into 6 new areas of learning that ensure that all children learn traditional subjects like history but also about their physical development, health and wellbeing.

And let me also say, it's a complete nonsense to suggest that it's an either-or choice between learning history on the one hand; and learning about healthy eating and why physical activity is important on the other.

Of course children should learn both.

Sir Jim's review will give primary heads and teachers more freedom to decide what to teach and when to allow children to enjoy learning and make good progress.

And let me also be clear that children need to be secure in English and maths but also have good communication skills and other essential life skills if they're going to succeed.

So the idea that primary schools should opt out of the National Curriculum is not only in my view wrong but also puts ideology above the interests of the children in those schools.

But schools can't do it alone.

I've said many times that I don't want teachers to be social workers or housing officers or surrogate parents for that matter.

And as all of you know, tackling all the barriers to learning is about more than just what happens at school.

So third, we must build a real culture of early intervention and prevention in which schools, children's services and the voluntary sector work closely together to tackle poverty and improve outcomes for children and young people.

That's why we're legislating to ensure there are strong Children's Trusts in every area.

And in the statutory guidance that we will publish, I intend to place a duty on Children's Trusts to have effective early intervention strategies in place.

But early intervention is most important of all for those who need extra support.

We've seen what a difference is now being made to the lives of disabled children and their families as a result of the £340m that we announced in our Aiming High for Disabled Children programme and the further £90m that we also committed to improve short breaks.

That's why we also committed a further £340m in our child health strategy earlier this year to allow local services to work together and improve the lives of disabled children and their families.

We also know that a third of primary schools pupils eligible for free school meals are identified as having SEN.

And while 81% of children now leave primary school secure in English at level 4, two thirds of the children who don't reach that standard have a special educational need.

And as John Bercow said in his report on improving speech and language services, the acid test of any society is whether you offer extra support to those who need it most.

Because as he always says, failing to do so not only means risking holding back that child's progress but also in a very small minority of cases storing up more serious problems for society to deal with at a later stage.

So fourth, we must better identify and support those children with special educational needs.

Let me say at the outset that I do believe that we should include children with a disability or special educational need in mainstream education wherever that is possible and what parents want.

I know that special schools have a vital role to play where children have severe disabilities and complex needs that require specialist support.

But I have seen how good schools are already ensuring that young people with disabilities can learn alongside other young people and still also play a full part in school life.

And we need to do more to:

- ensure that all schools have strong early identification processes in place and staff who can recognise the signs of a special educational need;
- specifically identify those children with dyslexia at the earliest stage and provide them with the support they need – and Sir Jim Rose will report on this in the coming weeks;
- and help all children to develop good communication skills whether they're severely impaired or because they simply need help to expand their vocabulary – and this is just one of the recommendations that we are taking forward following John Bercow's review last year.

Putting the needs of children with a special education need first and intervening early also means listening to their parents.

Whenever I talk to parents of children with a special educational need, they often tell me that they have to fight the system to get their child's needs acknowledged, to get a statement for their child and to then get their school or Local Authority to comply with it.

And getting the support they need for their children must not depend on them having the time, energy and often the ability to demand exactly what they need.

Sometimes these parents will also be from deprived backgrounds, might have a disability themselves or might not have English as their first language.

But that shouldn't mean that their children are left to fail.

That was why we asked Brian Lamb to look specifically at the requirements that are placed on schools and Local Authorities to produce this information for parents as part of his inquiry into improving parental confidence in services for children with SEN.

He has published his latest report today.

Brian says that there are many schools and Local Authorities that communicate really effectively with parents of children with SEN and boost parents' confidence in them.

But there are also some instances where professionals aren't communicating with parents as well – and in some cases, poor communication has generated a real hostility amongst parents who have been made to feel like they and their children are a nuisance.

www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's adheres to the Fundraising Promise and Fundraising Standards Board guidelines.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605

Brian says that a significant shift is needed to improve the interaction between parents and carers on the one hand and schools and children's services on the other.

And he makes a number of detailed recommendations to further improve the information provided to parents and also to strengthen the accountability system that we have today accepted.

As well as the wider measures that we are taking forward to strengthen engagement with all parents, we will:

- simplify the requirements made of schools by ensuring that all schools – including short-stay schools – set out how they identify, teach and include pupils with SEN in wider policies that they regularly review with teachers, parents and pupils;
- and ensure that the new School Report Card includes a measure of progress and outcomes for children with SEN.

Because Brian also rightly highlights the important local leadership role that Local Authorities have to play, we will also:

- ask Local Authorities to publish the SEN policies of all schools in their areas;
- and monitor whether Local Authorities are meeting their statutory SEN and disability requirements and take action if they're not.

And we will also ask Local Authorities to ensure their staff, as well as teachers and other children's professionals, receive appropriate training on working with parents of children with disabilities or SEN.

In his letter to me, Brian has also said that where statements for children have been provided, they could have been clearer and more useful to parents.

And he also said that he wants SEN and disability provision to be a higher priority in the inspection process.

That's why I've asked him to look at what changes we can make to strengthen the inspection framework and the role of Ofsted – including through legislation if necessary – as well as how the statementing process could be improved.

He will report back to me in July.

In my lecture tonight, I have set out the approach that we are taking to ensure that deprivation and poverty but also a special educational need or disability do not hold back any child or young person.

We are determined to do all that we can and to:

- keep on investing in schools and in children's services;
- provide extra support to those who need it where it's needed;
- improve attainment but also wellbeing;
- and build strong partnerships with the voluntary sector and across communities.

Because that is what we need to do to help every child and young person fulfil their potential.

That is the responsibility on us in government.

It is a great responsibility.

I take it extremely seriously.

I know you do too.

Because that is what our moral purpose dictates.

And I look forward to working with you in the months and years to helping every child, not just some, to fulfil their potential.

Thank you.

www.barnardos.org.uk

Barnardo's adheres to the Fundraising Promise and Fundraising Standards Board guidelines.

Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605