

Could do BETTER

What's the point of redefining a 'satisfactory' performance as one that 'requires improvement'? **Phil Beadle** has a theory...

When Sir Michael Wilshaw was appointed Chief Inspector of Schools there were many working in inner-city schools who yelped a hearty (though, of course, slightly beaten) sigh of relief. Mainly we sighed because, for once, we have a head of Ofsted who is steeped in life at the sharp end, who understands what it is to work in a school where good behaviour is not a given.

Sir Michael Wilshaw has served many long years as head of three inner-city London schools: St Bonaventure's and (briefly) Eastlea Community School in Newham, as well as, and famously, Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, and he has led these institutions to being perceived as beacons of shining achievement; jewels embedded in the clay of east London's less salubrious areas. Wilshaw's headships have transformed ideas as to what becomes possible the moment you match inner-city kids up to high expectations, hard-working staff,

PHIL BEADLE IS AN EXPERIENCED TEACHER, AUTHOR, BROADCASTER, SPEAKER, AND JOURNALIST. (PHILBEADLE.COM)



Barbara Ellen has described Phil as 'an emerging national hero', and at least one head teacher 'would never give him a job, let alone an award'. We're delighted to have him on board at TS as a regular columnist.

and a sense of the long game.

Optimistically, his first few statements on being appointed gave the impression that – at long last – metropolitan educational environments were to be given a rest from being forced into endlessly writhing under the ceaseless, magnifying heat of punitive inspection. The Chief Inspector's recent piece in Education Guardian brought attention to the excellence of much provision in poorer areas, and made telling contrast with the standards in some leafier climes. "Last year alone," wrote Wilshaw. "85 schools serving the most deprived communities in our society were judged to be providing outstanding education. If they can do it in these challenging circumstances there is absolutely no reason why other schools in more prosperous areas cannot." Well said.

So, his celebration of inner-city achievement and an implied statement of intent that he's likely to go after provincial mediocrity is welcome. However, where the exhalation of relief is replaced immediately by a less-than-sharp intake of weary breath is in his decision to cancel the 'satisfactory' grade and replace it with 'requires improvement'. This has caused some to wonder whether Wilshaw's Clint Eastwood is, against type, now nestling safely in the pocket of Gove's Lee Van Cleef.

That the current administration's intent is to make Kenneth Baker's dream come true is obvious: they want to dispense entirely with local authorities and to devastate the power of the unions by destroying collective pay bargaining. There are reasons for them wanting to do so. Some of them might be argued not to be entirely ideological; some are certainly concerned with driving up standards. The chief vehicle of delivery of these desired outcomes is the 'academisation' of state education. And there is a sense within government circles that the argument has been won – a tipping point has been reached.

Witness Sir Bruce Liddington, Director General of E-ACT, outlining his best guess as to what 'Future Schools Policy' will look like. In a speech in May last year Liddington, who is

shoulder-to-shoulder with policy makers, stated matter-of-factly, "All schools will be academies," before going on to list future policy as including, "profit making schools?"

In dispensing with the idea that a school can provide a 'satisfactory' education Wilshaw, at a stroke, doubles the numbers of categories of 'school failure', ensuring that where once three quarters of available categories were perceived as a pass, now half the available judgements are 'fails'.

The definition of what constitutes 'school failure' is thereby extended to encompass ever more schools, and to give the Secretary of State a whole new tranche of 'failed' institutions that he can hand over to academy chains or to the disappointingly rapacious faith-based providers.

The potential impact of this manifestly Orwellian linguistic stroke is vast: the third of all schools that had previously judged as being 'satisfactory' can expect to be informed they are now in a category of failure, and that if they do not achieve a better grade in their next inspection they will be subject to takeover. This is an inspection regime that, contrary to fashion in education, has just raised the pass mark by 25%, and has done so because it conspires with a government that actively wants more schools to fail!

Sir Michael's career has, till now, been centred around making a vast contribution towards improving the lives of children from deprived backgrounds. It would be a shame if history failed to register those decades of principled achievement and, instead, regarded a man of substance as being the party political tool who proved, without doubt, that Ofsted's vaunted independence from government is little more than a crudely unfunny joke in which absolutely no-one believes.

