

Wilshaw makes a clever retreat

The atmosphere of the last engagement between heads and Sir Michael Wilshaw at the ASCL conference was very different from the edgy, irritable meetings that have gone before. Under attack from Gove and two policy think-tanks, as well as the school unions, he has thought discretion the better part of valour and decided to make allies of headteachers.

In truth, he did not have much choice. Having lost the unconditional support of his political master, Wilshaw needed to accommodate the complaints of headteachers and has adopted, almost wholeheartedly, the recommendations of the recent [ASCL report on Ofsted](#). He has accepted their dissatisfaction about the quality of inspectors being used by contractors, who have often been out of the classroom for decades and have widely differing approaches to evaluating the quality of teaching they observe.

Despite Wilshaw's almost desperate attempts to make lesson observation judgement criteria more subtle, he has been unable to rid inspectors' reports of comments about the failure of teachers to construct lessons along the pre-ordained, three-part structure decreed by the DfE and embraced so fiercely by previous Ofsted regimes. This is because, many headteachers believe, inspectors are often ex-LEA officials who have been away from the classroom for so long that they defensively hang on to simplistic criteria in the absence of any real knowledge about modern teaching and learning. A common nostrum amongst heads has been: 'Those that can, teach; those that can't, become Ofsted inspectors.'

In many cases, of course, this is unfair. But inconsistency in the quality of inspections is rife and this was the main point of the criticisms of Ofsted from ASCL and think-tank, Policy Exchange (who recently released [a report of a similar nature](#)).

Replacing the contractors' hired guns with serving headteachers will add a little credibility to the process, but will it really tackle the consistency issue? Secondary heads are often as removed from classroom teaching as inspectors. Primary heads will have more direct experience of lesson observation, but even here, it can be very idiosyncratic.

Directly hiring more staff and training them internally is the only solution. (We might humbly add here that Ofsted would be well-advised to take up our mobile lesson observation and mentoring framework, *What Is Good Teaching?* – soon to be released as an [online tool](#). It's subtle, fast and consistent).

Altering the inspection regime is also a placatory move. It means the vast majority of good schools are not going to get the full-team, four-day terror, every four years. It's going to be a one-day visit from a constructive, friendly chappy, and schools' own data will be much more important in assessments.

It will save on costs, says Wilshaw, and allow Ofsted to focus on underperforming schools. It will also take a lot of angst out of the system for heads, Ofsted and the government. Gove's view on all this is supportive, even mellow – 'standards are rising', and that means inspectors should 'take a step back, and let (teachers) get on with the job'. This too is a change of tone and suggests Gove is wanting to mend some fences with the profession.

However, despite the benefits for heads and Ofsted itself, will this de minimis regime really be good for schools? Has all the anxiety about comparative standards of English schools in relation to our international competitors, so loudly voiced just a couple of months ago, simply melted away? Has the concern that many of our good and outstanding schools are really relying on high-quality intake and not adding much value, in other words, coasting, simply melted away? One day a year for the large group of schools in the middle isn't going to tackle the coasting or comparative issues.

Taking a step back from the fray, the new relaxed inspection regime looks like one of those wild swings in educational policymaking, from excessive to inadequate, that have bedevilled our school system for decades.

Academy chains

The bad news about academy chains continues to surface. After the scandal of E-ACT, the DfE has expressed concerns about the performance of schools in a number of chains and forbidden them to take on any more schools until their standards improve. It's a significant vote of no-confidence.

There will, we predict, continue to be lots of problems with academy chains. They are analogous to businesses, but without the disciplining force of the marketplace or shareholders. They often rapidly collect large numbers of failing schools with no evidence whatsoever that they have the capacity to turn them round.

They are empires, often without the public service ethos that once characterised local authorities, and are driven by individuals with wildly differing motives. These motives might be educational vision, but more often, it's religious fervour, or the ego of able school leaders who believe they can manage large numbers of schools with an eye to the salary of the CEO of a big corporation.

Chains are another example of education policy made on the hoof, without any real strategic vision behind it. It would be great to see a study of how much public resources academy chains are consuming compared to local authority education departments. It's a fair guess that such a study would be shocking.