

Bridget Phillipson's speech on the schools white paper

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Bridget Phillipson's speech on the schools white paper, delivered at Ormiston Bushfield Academy in Peterborough.

Hello everyone – and thank you to all the staff here at Ormiston Bushfield Academy for hosting us.

Ladies and gentlemen, at a conference last year I spoke about a boy called Jack.

Jack went to Five Acres School in the Forest of Dean, a school which works wonders for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

When Jack arrived for his first day, he wasn't sure if that place was for him.

But Simon, the headteacher, had been in his shoes. He'd grown up in that community. He'd been a student at the school himself.

So he knew that with the right mix of support and challenge, Jack would go far.

And he was right. Because Jack went on to become Head Boy.

He did well in his exams and now runs his own successful business.

Jack's story shows that a great school can lift the lives of all children.

And I've known that all my life, because great schools, great teachers, changed my life.

I grew up on a tough council street in the north east. It was just me and my mam.

We didn't always have very much, but my teachers taught me that success isn't just for children from the wealthy end of town.

And that aspiration is for all.

Our school system has come a long way.

Comprehensive education taking hold in the 1960s.

Jim Callaghan's Great Debate in the 1970s.

And the National Curriculum in the late 1980s.

SATs were introduced when I was in school in the early 1990s – and it was only then was I properly taught times tables.

Then came academies under Labour in the 2000s.

And that journey of change in our schools still has far to go of course.

Because our system works well for some children, but not all.

Not all.

I was lucky, Jack was lucky. These sorts of stories give me hope.

But it's the others that drive me. The children like us who went off to school every morning, just like we did. With dreams to do well, just like we had, but who went to different schools, taught by different teachers, not trained to meet their needs, who weren't included in the achievement others enjoyed.

They didn't get success stories of their own, just disappointment.

And I am not content to ignore all of them, to point to a lucky few and call the system a success.

Because I am for all children.

Because despite the heroic efforts of all of our staff,

the disadvantage gap is still wide.

Children with SEND are side-lined.

And bright children from ordinary families are still not achieving all that they should.

When it comes to opportunity, background still counts for too much.

And hard work too little.

In Britain we believe that success should come to those who work hard, not just those with rich parents and good connections.

That's the story we like to tell ourselves. But to make it true for our country first we must make it true for our schools.

Every child sharing in success.

Because I reject the lie that high standards and inclusion can't go together, that excellence is only possible for some children.

"The soft bigotry of low expectations", as others have said.

High standards and inclusion, it's not one or the other. It's both.

Standards aren't high if some children are left to struggle alone.

And inclusion means the right to be included in excellence, not mediocrity.

But the status quo ignores that truth and fails our children.

I am for every child. And that means change.

It means a plan for schools not as a standalone but as the heartbeat of a wider body of reform.

And to those who have come to believe that change isn't possible, I say look at what we've achieved

so far, together.

Expanding free school meals, rolling out new free breakfast clubs, ending the two-child limit, fighting the disgrace of child poverty.

We're rolling out Best Start Family Hubs so that parents can get the support they need.

We're delivering the 30-hours a week of government-funded childcare and begun to turn around the children's social care system.

And we're reforming the skills system to put every young person on the pathway to success.

Those were our promises to parents at the election, and that's what we've delivered since.

And now, we go further.

Parents, here is what I want to deliver for your child.

A great local school.

A school of high standards and inclusion.

A school filled with the sounds of sport, music and drama.

A school anchored in your community.

A school driven by ambition for every student.

And with the brilliant teaching to translate that ambition into achievement.

I want your child to achieve. I want your child to thrive.

Join with us, on this journey of opportunity, and I promise you that standards will rise.

Not just for some children, but for all of our children. And for your children, children growing up under this Labour government.

And where deprivation is deepest, I will be boldest.

I will cut the disadvantage gap in half.

School leaders care about this just as much as I do.

But the way we fund their efforts does them no favours.

Too much comes as a yes-no, on-off solution to a problem of scale and detail.

So we'll change it.

We'll talk to parents, schools and experts - and we'll drive funding to where it's needed most.

We have a moral responsibility to work together on this.

Families with schools, schools with other schools, local authorities, health providers, social care.

Everyone with a stake in our common future.

From here on, every child will benefit from a broad school experience, support that stretches from birth to the workplace, smoothing the transition from early years into schools, no child falling through the gaps.

And when children reach school, they'll get the knowledge and skills to flourish.

Support and stretch and breadth. That's what children get here at Bushfield.

Come back in a few weeks and you'll see Shrek performed to sold out audiences.

They were also the lead school for the Royal Shakespeare Company's Playmaking Festival last summer.

So from Shrek and Donkey to Romeo and Juliet - if that's not true breadth then I don't know what is.

Ofsted says that every pupil here can pursue their dreams. And the best schools deliver it through high standards and inclusion.

Now for me, nowhere is that clearer than with reading.

As a child, reading gave me the chance to discover different worlds. A route to explore my passions.

Just like the motto of the National Year of Reading - if you're into it, read into it. If a child is a strong reader, the whole curriculum opens up.

But is there anything more excluding than sitting in those lessons, not able to read properly and engage?

High standards on reading are vital for children to take their learning further, right throughout their lives.

Every child can be included in those high standards.

And I want to tell you why that matters by telling you about a young woman called Ruby.

Now there are two important things you need to know about Ruby.

She's both competitive and she's caring.

She'll do whatever it takes to beat you at top golf, but she'll give you a hug afterwards.

And Ruby is in year 13 at Morpeth School. She has anxiety and additional learning needs.

Her first day at school was overwhelming. She remembers sitting there with her hood up, not saying a word.

School hadn't worked for her in the past. So why would it now?

She was only coming in once, maybe twice a week.

I've heard so many stories like that. And the endings break my heart. Children slowly withdraw, stop attending.

They reach adulthood without the knowledge, the skills, the qualifications they deserve.

But that's not what happened to Ruby. Morpeth was ready to meet her needs and grow her strengths.

The school works with a charity called The Difference to set an inclusion strategy.

They also helped to open an inclusion support base, where Ruby could go for a softer, calmer start to the day.

And that was twinned with academic support.

For the headteacher, John Pickett, that's non-negotiable. Ruby has as much right as any other child to excel in her exams.

Because inclusion and high standards go together.

Hand in hand.

Feeling included has helped Ruby succeed academically. Succeeding academically has meant she has grown in confidence.

There was a time when she thought university just wasn't an option.

But now she's got offers from four of them.

That's the difference a great school can make.

Aspiration for every child.

Whether that's university, a great apprenticeship or on to further training.

Now in her final year at Morpeth, Ruby is a mentor, helping children lower down the school.

She wants to make sure all children get the help she did.

And for them she won't settle for anything less than top marks.

Like I said, competitive and caring too.

I love Ruby's story. But we know she's the exception, not the rule.

Many children with SEND aren't so lucky.

I've spent the last year speaking to parents.

And I have seen such deep love, such deep determination to do whatever it takes to get their child the education they deserve.

But parents are tired of battling against a system with no face, no heart, no soul.

Tired of their child going to school far away, with no local friends to play with during the holidays.

Tired of seeing their child disappointed on results day, through no lack of effort or talent or hard work.

Just a shortage of proper support.

We've come to accept serious underachievement for children with SEND as just sad but inevitable.

But it's not. It's the direct result of the system we have.

Late support. Inconsistent support.

Support which children have to leave their communities to find.

It's the direct result of the failure to deliver inclusion in mainstream schools, closer to home.

Children with SEND miss out on high-quality teaching because schools often just aren't set up to meet their needs.

Their progress stalls. Their confidence drops. And their life chances fade just because supposedly they don't fit the mould.

But it's not written in the stars. A better future is possible.

One in which all children grow up together, go to their local school together, achieve and thrive together.

Today, we begin to build that future – together.

At long last, children with SEND get the rights they deserve.

The right to be included in their local state schools.

The right to enjoy the same high standards and expectations that we have for other children.

We are investing billions of pounds in mainstream schools to make them fit for children with SEND.

To adapt classrooms and corridors. To train teachers and teaching assistants.

To make specialist support ready. To rebuild trust with families.

More children educated at a great local mainstream school, with their friends, close to their family, part of their local community.

That's what's best for them.

My department has published new evidence on English and maths GCSE results, looking at similar children with SEND, and the message is clear:

They do better in mainstream schools.

And that's backed up by research from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

Not just GCSE results. The evidence shows it's good for their chances of getting a job when they finish school.

A rich and fulfilling adult life – that's what inclusive mainstream can offer children with SEND.

And all children will benefit from our extra investment in the universal offer.

That must be the way forward in our schools. Support that responds to needs – not paperwork.

The first thought – not a last resort.

SEND professionals focused on helping children – not filling out forms.

Money meant for education spent on education.

Flexibility built in through new layers of support.

Universal for all.

Targeted support through Individual Support Plans.

Groups of schools working together where needs are greater.

Specialist provision for children who need it.

And forget the misinformation you might have heard: EHCPs for children with the most complex needs will stay, guided by nationally defined and evidence-based Specialist Provision Packages.

What's crucial is that support starts early. So from now on Our Best Start Family Hubs for younger children will cover special educational needs too.

I'm investing more than £200 million in our hubs so that all of them have a dedicated SEND practitioner.

Bringing everyone together. That's how children with SEND can achieve and thrive together in mainstream schools.

Like at Winyates Primary – just a twenty-minute walk from where we are now.

A brilliant school serving a community that's had its fair share of challenges.

Staff at Winyates do home visits, they study the data, they know and understand the children coming through the school gates.

A cycle of assess, plan, do and review.

Children with SEND are involved in all parts of school life.

They represent the school in sports teams. They get the support they need to succeed in the classroom.

Again and again, they are reminded that they belong here.

Just as children with SEND belong in our society.

When they get a place at Winyates, the school sends them a golden ticket to build the excitement.

Colleagues, the policies I'm unveiling today aren't extreme solutions.

Being aspirational for children with SEND shouldn't be radical.

It's common sense. It's simply believing in them.

So parents please hear me when I say, I believe in your children.

This is about improving their support, not removing their support.

No child will have to leave their school.

Last November I visited Waverley School, which serves children with severe and profound, and multiple learning difficulties.

I met the headteacher, Laura, and her fantastic staff them.

They do the kind of quiet work that goes unseen and uncelebrated too often but matters just so much.

There will always be wonderful special schools for children with the most complex needs.

They will always be a source of expertise for the wider system, right at the heart of our plans.

But this isn't the end of the conversation. We're launching a consultation – and I urge you all to tell us what you think.

Join us in this shared moral mission, and together we'll build a system that works for every child with SEND.

For disadvantaged children too.

And for the children from hard-working families, who might not have special needs, who might not have come from a tough neighbourhood, the children who are clever but coasting, who achieve just enough to escape notice. but drift into lives too often empty of opportunity.

From now on, those children will get the stretch and challenge they deserve too.

'Good enough' will no longer be enough.

Aspiration will be for all.

If we get that right, then we can reverse a sorry trend that has seen some families turning away from education.

True engagement means deep and meaningful partnerships between schools and parents.

That's what I expect all schools to do – to show parents that success can be for their children too.

Just like at Winyates. Parents come in for drop-in mornings.

Cookery classes. Christmas carols.

They live the truth we believe: that it takes a school to make a community, and a community to make a school.

The headteacher Colette – who is with us today – she's been at Winyates for 20 years, she taught many of the parents herself.

She understands that a quick chat with mam or dad at the school gates can make all the difference.

That bond must be cherished. And it must be built on a sense of shared responsibility.

That means parents too – the responsibility to send your child to school, to support their learning, to remind them day after day how much it matters.

It matters because that's where children belong.

And ever since I was at school, I've known that there is no stronger force for change in a child's life than a world class teacher.

So let me take this opportunity to say thank you.

To our teachers, our teaching assistants, our leaders, and our support staff.

Thank you for all you do for our children.

Join with me on this journey and I promise to back you to focus on what you do best, with the challenge to do it even better.

But I talk to you this morning, to colleagues in our nurseries and across local services, to parents around the country, not just as individuals, but as co-owners of something bigger.

Partners in our moral mission to lift the life chances of all of our children.

That's why I return time and again to collaboration.

And perhaps the most powerful drivers of collaboration are strong school trusts.

They multiply excellence and opportunity.

So I will bring collaboration to the fore, all schools joining or forming high-quality school trusts.

And that includes schools run by local authorities and local partnerships setting up trusts too.

Local school trusts, rooted in their towns and cities, bringing us all together.

Inclusion is a choice.

It's an educational choice.

And it's also a political choice.

Because we could duck this challenge, ignore the injustice of a postcode lottery in life chances, putting off fixing the SEND system, yet again.

The system works well for some, at least.

No.

That's just not good enough.

Our moment calls for courage.

Because before us sits a once-in-a-generation chance for change.

In our classrooms today are the little boys and girls who will go on to become the inventors, artists, creators, engineers, scientists, partners and parents of tomorrow.

They can become the engaged and responsible citizens ready to shape our country as we head towards the 22nd century.

Now is the time to come together.

Communities, government, parents, schools and beyond.

To do what's right.

To secure our common future.

And to build a Britain of opportunity for all.

Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bridget-phillipsons-speech-on-the-schools-white-paper>