



**Rt Hon Michael Gove MP**  
Secretary of State

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1st March 2011

*Des Ekeghere*

### **Improving Underperforming Schools**

I know how hard you have been working in the last nine months to advance our mission of making opportunity more equal. The sense of moral purpose you bring to our work of raising standards for all children is hugely encouraging.

I am particularly grateful for the constructive way in which Local Authorities and schools have responded to our White Paper – The Importance of Teaching. The White Paper sets out a series of reforms which, we hope, will transform state education for the better. It draws on the best evidence of what works in education, in this country and abroad. The fact that this country has so many examples of superb educational practice to draw on is, in no small part, down to the efforts of our many brilliant heads and great teachers as well as strong Local Authority leadership.

I am, naturally, delighted that there is so much to celebrate in state education. And I am particularly pleased that our reforms offer successful professionals the chance to display their talents on a broader canvas. The freedoms which Academy status brings have generated a virtuous dynamic in state education which benefits every child. Innovation has been encouraged, teachers have been empowered and new capacity has been created in the system to support weaker schools. Your support for these reforms has been invaluable.

But while we can celebrate these successes, we also know there needs to be relentless, persistent and focussed action to deal with those schools where performance just isn't good enough.

As a parent, I know children only have one chance at education. As a minister, I cannot allow underperforming schools where children are not receiving the education they deserve to carry on, unreformed. I want to be fair to every professional working hard to improve children's lives and offer them my fullest support to do even better. But my first concern is the future of our children. Every day they spend in classrooms where they are not learning properly is another day they are held back from achieving their full potential.

That is why I am determined that, together, we raise standards in our underperforming schools.

In the White Paper we outlined our determination to address underperformance by setting out new tougher and fairer floor standards to judge how primary schools are performing for 11-year-olds and how secondary schools are serving 16-year-olds. Schools which fall below these standards will be eligible for intervention.

There has been no formal process of properly identifying underperforming primary schools before. And certainly no systematic programme of intervening to address weak performance.

Until now, it's been presumed that primary schools were below an acceptable standard if they failed to get at least 55% of their students to the basic level (Level 4) in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school (Key Stage 2).

But no effective strategic action has been required to address underperforming primaries, making the floor standard a weak lever for improvement.

We want to take a tougher approach. We want the floor standard to be 60%.

It can't be right that a school, in ordinary circumstances, allows more than four pupils in ten to leave without reaching basic standards in literacy and numeracy.

That floor standard will also have to rise further over time. Other nations are rapidly improving their own education systems and we cannot allow our children to be left behind in the global race to the top.

I realise, of course, that some schools face very specific challenges. And I know there has been criticism of floor standards in the past for operating in too crude a fashion. Some of that criticism has come from those afraid to acknowledge underperformance. But I want to be as fair as possible in any judgements that are made.

So any primary school where the children make better than average progress between Key Stages 1 and 2 will be exempt from falling below the floor.

For secondary schools, floor standards will be made tougher by raising the floor by five percentage points.

A secondary school will be below the floor if fewer than 35% of pupils get 5 GCSEs at grades A\*-C, including English and Mathematics. It is unacceptable to have secondary schools where around two-thirds of children are not secure in the basics by 16.

We will, of course, be raising the floor standards further over time. And we will also, as with primary schools, ensure these standards are more fairly applied. Any secondary school where the children are making better than average progress between 11 and 16 (Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4) will be exempt from falling below the floor.



## **Developing Plans**

I want to work with you in the weeks ahead to turn round these underperforming schools.

The first step, I believe, should be yours. I want Local Authorities to draw up plans for improving performance in all schools (excluding Academies) below the floor. I'm not going to be prescriptive about what the plans might entail. I'd like you to be ambitious and would encourage you to spell out how all those schools which cause you concern might improve. I'm also interested in plans which cover more than one local authority area.

I am sure you will want to consider harnessing the talents of great heads, especially National and Local Leaders of Education, to help those schools which are underperforming. And I know that there are a growing number of high-quality academy sponsors who can, very quickly, introduce the sort of transformation children in these schools deserve.

For schools with a religious character below the floor standard, I am sure you will want to work with the appropriate diocese or religious authority in developing your plans. And I will be writing a similar letter to sponsors of Academies below the floor standards.

In order to assist you, my officials will work alongside the Schools Commissioner, Dr Elizabeth Sidwell, to discuss your priorities for improvement. I know many of you have been concerned that bureaucratic and process barriers have hindered effective intervention in underperforming schools. To respond to this, I have asked officials to work with ADCS to explore streamlining approaches.

Officials will be in touch with you shortly to help you develop your proposals. These

plans should be succinct in nature, and I would be grateful if you could send them to [SSID.MAILBOX@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:SSID.MAILBOX@education.gsi.gov.uk) by 15 April.

From the summer, once your plan has been agreed with officials, lead advisers will assist you to implement the required improvements. Many of these improvements will not require extra financial resources. However, where funding is a crucial part of securing improvement in your plan, this will be allocated to schools in the 2011-12 financial year.

Working together, I'm convinced we can transform education immeasurably for the better. I look forward to discussing how we can make a difference for the young people and children in most need, who are our first concern.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M Gove', written in a cursive style.

MICHAEL GOVE