EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE

Does the claim of '1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools' stack up?

Jon Andrews, Director for School System and Performance and Deputy Head of Research

In my time in the Department for Education, I was involved in crafting countless 'lines to take' for ministers – those key messages with a killer statistic used in debates and in the media.

For government statisticians, lines to take can be a challenge. They need to be something that gets the point across quickly and be something that ministers actually want to say. But at the same time you've probably got a long list of caveats and explanatory notes that you'd love to use.

And of course, it is absolutely essential that your statistics are not misleading. Whilst it is easy to be cynical from the outside, statisticians in government take that incredibly seriously.

That is why we now really need to stop hearing DfE's favourite statistic. There are unlikely to be many in education circles who are unaware that "there are now 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than there were in 2010". Whilst the number may have changed over time, it has been the go to statistic for several years.

A search of Hansard reveals at least 40 mentions spread across two prime ministers, four secretaries of state, and numerous ministers – including non-DfE ministers.[1]

It is easy to see why it is used. It's snappy, it's easy for non-specialists to understand, it's factually accurate, and, the ultimate for lines to take, it's an impressively big number. Little wonder then that in one month alone, the Department for Education's press office have used it in response to stories as diverse as secondary school offer day, breakfast clubs, troops to teachers, the ASCL conference, and an international survey of parents' attitudes to education.[2]

The problem is that it fails an important test of any statistic – it does not show the user what the producer believes it shows. In this case, it does not adequately demonstrate that standards in schools have improved since 2010, at least not to the extent that a quarter of all pupils are in significantly better schools because of any policy intervention.

[1] Based on searching the phrase "more children in good" https://hansard.parliament.uk/ (21 March 2018). Variants of the phrase may yield further results.
[2] DfE, *'Education in the media'*, March 2018. https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/

I am not the first to say this, and no doubt I will not be the last. But, as I was there when this statistic first took hold, I should probably try and help it gracefully depart.

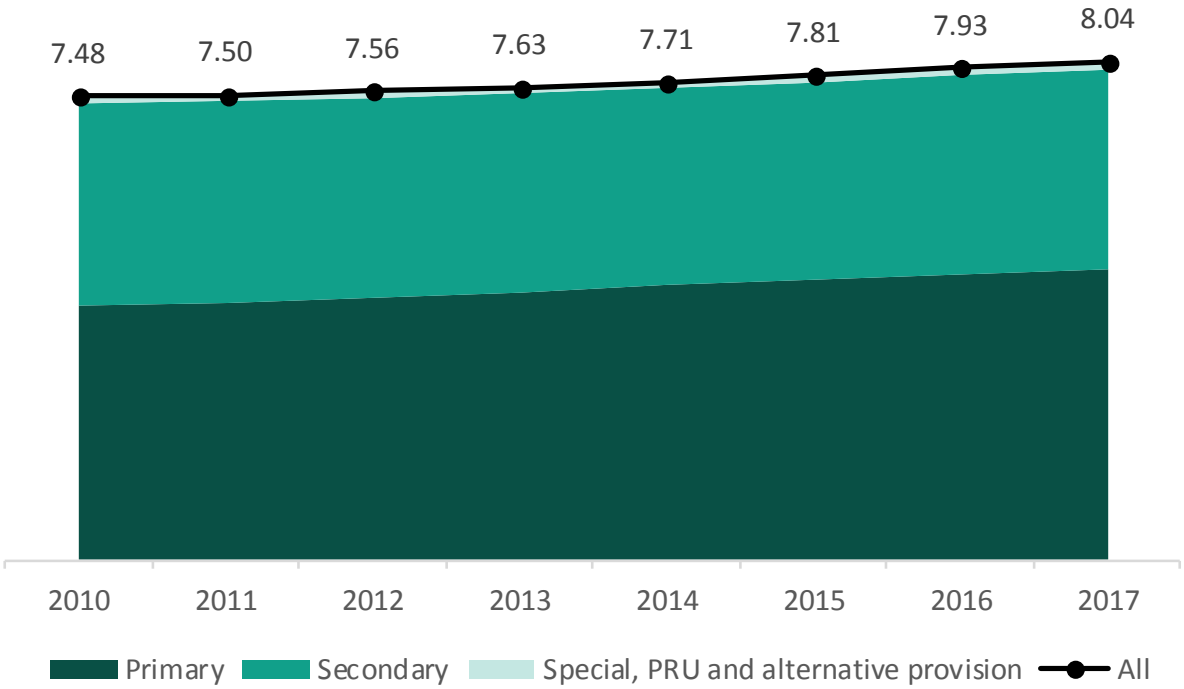
Before exploring why, it is only fair to recognise the challenges in reporting improvements over time. The way that pupils are assessed and the way that results are reported is very different now from how it was when the Coalition Government took office in May 2010. In primary schools we have a revised foundation stage profile, a new National Curriculum, new assessments in phonics, and tougher expected standards at the end of Key Stage 2. In secondary schools we have new GCSEs, a reduction in the number and 'value' of non-GCSE qualifications, a move to more academic subjects and a reduction in multiple and early entries. Our recent report on the performance of academy chains and local authorities considered this issue in more detail and we will be doing further work later in the year on tracking performance over time, but it's clear that the department cannot just say that X per cent of pupils achieved this in 2010 so things have improved by Y.

But the Ofsted line remains flawed in several ways.

Firstly, the effect of a growing pupil population. The line does not refer to an increase in proportion but an absolute increase in numbers - that is, there are more pupils in good or outstanding schools now than there were in 2010. There has however, been considerable growth in the number of pupils in state-funded schools in England – largely driven by an increase in the birth rate in the early 2000s.

Figure 1 shows that **the total number of pupils in state-funded schools in England increased by 560,000 between 2010 and 2017. Overall the pupil population has grown by 7.5 per cent over the period.**

Figure 1: The number of pupils (millions) in state-funded primary, secondary, special, PRU and alternative provision schools in England 2010 to 2017[3]

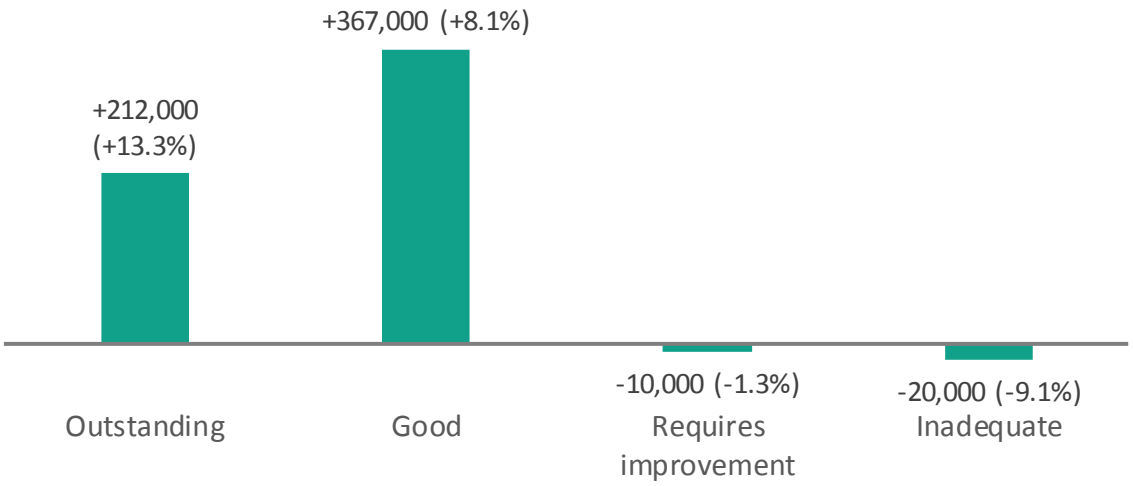


[3] DfE, *'Schools, pupils and their characteristics'*, January 2017
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2017

We can explore how this affects the number of pupils in good or outstanding schools by looking at that those schools that were open in both 2010 and 2017 and comparing their pupil numbers. By definition, this excludes new provision schools (such as free schools) that have opened in that time – so it does not give the complete total of pupils in good or outstanding schools – though our analysis does include pupil counts from predecessor schools from converter and sponsored academies (including where schools have multiple predecessors.)

In Figure 2 we group schools by their latest inspection outcome and show the change in pupil headcount between 2010 and 2017 (including percentage change).

Figure 2: The change in headcount between 2010 and 2017 of state-funded schools by latest inspection outcome as at end August 2017.

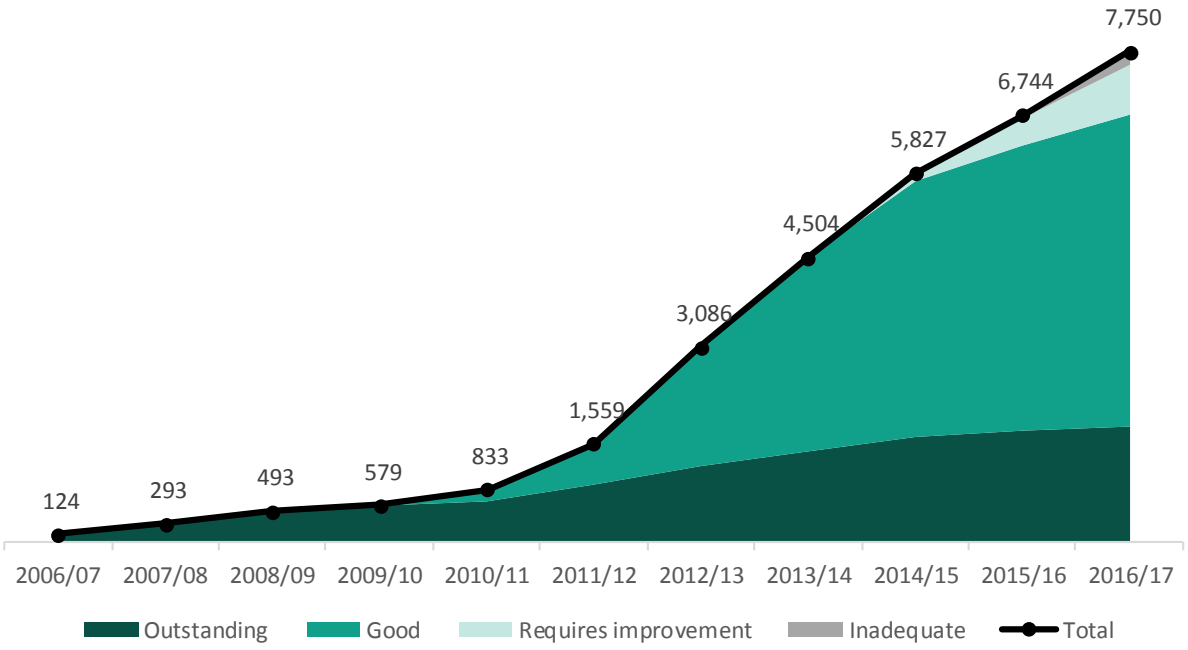


Schools rated as good or outstanding expanded more quickly than the overall pupil population – the increase in the number of pupils in good or outstanding schools therefore includes an element of pupils choosing to attend them as well as demographic shifts. **Overall, increases in the pupil population and shifts in the schools pupil attend account for 578,000 pupils of the increase in the number of pupils attending good or outstanding schools - over a quarter of the total.**

There have also been changes to the nature and frequency of inspection. Under the framework introduced in 2012, schools that had previously been rated as satisfactory would be inspected again within two years whereas the inspection of good and outstanding schools would draw on a risk based approach. Good schools would be eligible for inspection in their third year after inspection and, crucially, outstanding schools would not be inspected unless there had been a significant decline in their results (or safeguarding issues).

This means that there are a number of schools that have not been inspected for a significant length of time. Figure 3 plots the cumulative number of pupils by year of last inspection (so, for example, 4.5 million pupils are in schools that were last inspected in 2013/14).

Figure 3: Cumulative number of pupils (thousands) by latest inspection outcome and year of inspection for schools not inspected since that year



It shows that **579,000 pupils attend schools that are rated as good or outstanding but have not been inspected since at least 2010.** There are 124,000 pupils in schools that have not been inspected in the last 10 years.

That is not to say that we should exclude these pupils from totals of those attending good or outstanding schools. If they had been inspected more recently then they may well have achieved the same outcome. Furthermore, if Ofsted's risk based approach works effectively then schools at risk of changing outcome should be being identified.

But clearly there is a difference between analysis of centrally collected data and the wider understanding of a school that is possible through an inspection. They have also been inspected under a completely different inspection framework and – in many cases – there have been changes in school governance. Of the 1,407 schools that have not been inspected since 2010, 518 are converter academies. On conversion, these schools retain their previous inspection outcome and if they are outstanding are not routinely inspected. **In total, 309,000 pupils are in converter academies that have not been inspected since at least 2010, and have not been inspected as an academy.**

A further change was the move from a grade of 'satisfactory' to 'requires improvement'. From that point on, a grade of 'good' was seen as the minimum that a school should achieve.[4]

This has two potential effects. The intended effect is that there is a raising of the bar and an increased focus on schools that had previously been satisfactory but could have been doing better.[5]

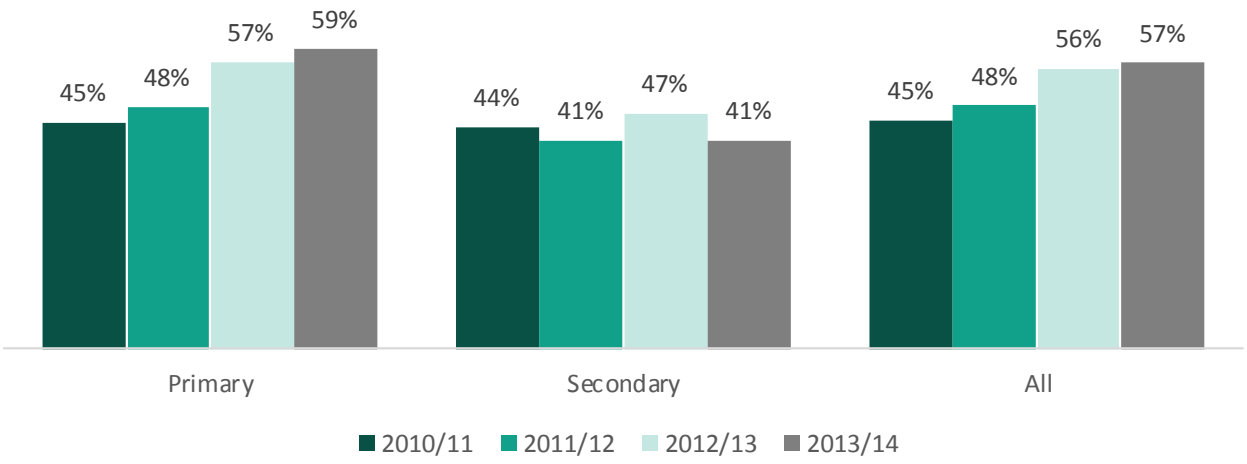
[4] Ofsted, *'Good now the minimum standard Ofsted expects from schools'*, September 2012 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/good-now-minimum-standard-ofsted-expects-from-schools

[5] For further discussion see Ofsted, *'Ofsted annual report 2012/13: schools report'*, December 2013

But it comes at the risk that the 'requires improvement' outcome is viewed as more punitive than 'satisfactory' making inspectors less likely to give it.

In Figure 4 we examine the inspection outcomes of those schools previously rated as satisfactory for the two academic years either side of this reform. We find that in 2012/13 there was a step change in improvements for primary schools (previously, the proportion that improved at inspection was 48 per cent, this increased to 57 per cent). However, there was no clear relationship for secondary schools.

Figure 4: The proportion of schools previously rated as satisfactory that then go on to achieve a rating of good or outstanding when inspected, by academic year



This does not represent a full analysis of this issue. There is clearly a need to control for other indicators of school performance and how the pool of schools that are rated as satisfactory changes over time. However, it would appear that for primary schools at least, the introduction of the requires improvement grade was associated with a large increase in one year in the proportion of schools improving their grade at inspection.

Conclusion

The Department for Education should stop using a line based on the fact that there are more children in good in good or outstanding schools than in 2010. We have identified several factors that undermine its status as a fair comparison:

- increases in the pupil population and shifts in the schools pupils attend account for 578,000 pupils of the increase in the number of pupils attending good or outstanding schools - over a quarter of the total.
- 579,000 pupils attend schools that are rated as good or outstanding but have not been inspected since at least 2010. There are 124,000 pupils in schools that have not been inspected in the last 10 years.
- In total, 309,000 pupils are in schools that have not been inspected since at least 2010 and are converter academies not inspected in that form.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201213-schools-report

- for primary schools, the introduction of the requires improvement grade was associated with a large increase in one year in the proportion of schools improving their grade at inspection.

The department frequently claims that the increase is due to the reforms put in place since 2010. It is difficult to see what reforms they are attributing to them to – given that it would mean improvements for a quarter of the school population. For example, the large structural reforms, through the expansion of the academies programme and the introduction of free schools, have so far resulted in little or no impact on overall attainment. The trends in the increase pre-date the introduction of the new national curriculum and new GCSEs.

Given what we know about the impact of reforms so far, ministers and the department should ask themselves 'is this scale of improvement plausible?'

If the answer is no, it is time to ditch their favourite line.