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Pocket Watch – Vocational education reform (by numbers)

Introduction

Ofsted Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw made tackling the issue of '*transforming vocational education*' his key theme when he **addressed** a group of employers at a CBI Conference this week. He isn't the first and probably won't be the last to take on a topic that continues to seize policy makers and practitioners alike. Already this month alone, we've had six reports, three major speeches, two lots of funding rules and one monster global Communique all dealing with the issue in one form or another. How far schools engage with it remains open to question but as Sir Michael implied it is a key issue. Here are some of the key points from the speech.

One big opportunity

We've had lots of opportunities over the years to get the issue right for young people and never quite managed it but we're now "*at a watershed moment,*" all the ducks are lined up: '*the economy is improving; jobs are more plentiful; all parties agree on the need and schools are ready for the challenge.*'

Two big problems

Lots of barriers to reform have been identified over the years but arguably there are two fundamental ones: '*a shift in attitudes and a shift in structures.*' The former is well-known, vocational learning being seen as a second-rate route, only suitable for other people's children and so on. The latter, the structural shift, refers to the fact that to operate effectively in this market, schools need to build on best practice of working in clusters, linking into Local Enterprise Partnerships, aligning to local demand, being more aware of local markets.

Three questions for employers

Throughout his speech, Sir Michael stressed the importance of regular employer involvement. As the CBI/Pearson survey has shown, many employers and employer bodies already do this but it's clear that in the most effective continental systems, such engagement is pretty much standard and systematic whereas here we have to work a lot harder to create the right conditions. It led Sir Michael to pose three challenges to employers, summarised as:

- Could you do more?
- Do you make young people aware of the types of jobs, work and opportunities available?
- Could you turn some of your vacancies into apprenticeship opportunities?

Four priorities

In all, Sir Michael identified four priorities:

- Apprenticeships to have equal prominence and equal status with A levels
- High-quality vocational education to be readily available as a valid option for all learners and not "*as a consolation prize for those who can't do anything else*"
- Employer engagement to be seen as an essential requirement
- Vocational learning to have a clear line of sight to work



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