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COMMENT: How to close the north-south divide between secondary schools

[Michael Jopling](#), Professor in Education, [Department of Education and Lifelong Learning](#) at Northumbria University, discusses the north-south divide affecting secondary schools for The Conversation.

Michael Wilshaw, chief inspector of schools and head of Ofsted, knows how to attract headlines. In his [fourth annual report](#) on the state of education and skills in England, he did not hold back:

What we are seeing is nothing short of a divided nation after the age of 11. Children in the North and Midlands are much less likely to attend a good or outstanding secondary school than those in the rest of the country. Of the 173 failing secondary schools in the country, 130 are in the North and Midlands and 43 are in the South.

There is considerable speculation about what has caused the division and what we can do about it. Although the secretary of state for education, Nicky Morgan, was careful not to refer to the London Challenge when she was interviewed on [Newsnight](#) on November 2, several commentators have pointed to its enduring [influence](#) in transforming school performance in London.

The [London Challenge](#) was a secondary school improvement programme aimed to lift attainment that ran from 2003 to 2011 and was expanded in 2008 into the [City Challenge](#) to include primary schools and two new areas, Greater Manchester and the Black Country.

Wilshaw does not directly mention the challenge in his report, but he does link the improvements he saw as a London headteacher in the late 1990s to

what he terms “the collective decision by headteachers, local politicians, chief executives and MPs to no longer tolerate underperformance”. He has called for “collective action” to raise standards in secondary schools across the country.

So the solution appears straightforward: apply collectively what worked in London to schools to the North and Midlands in particular. Unfortunately, things are a little more complex.

Replicating success is never easy

Although the London Challenge ended in 2011 there is little consensus about what made it apparently so effective. [Mike Tomlinson](#), who was a chief adviser to the London Challenge, said that its success was partly down to improving the quality of leadership, teaching and learning in schools, achieved through high-quality professional development and support.

An [evaluation](#) put its success down to factors such as tackling school improvement at an area level and drawing on external expertise, including from local authority advisers. [Research undertaken](#) into the implementation of the London Challenge emphasised the importance of combining structural changes, such as the introduction of city academies, with emphasis on collaboration and actively sharing good school improvement practice.

But [recently published research](#) argued that improved performance of disadvantaged pupils in London was present in both primary and secondary schools from the mid-1990s. It attributed this to: “gradual improvements in school quality”, rather than to factors directly associated with the London Challenge.

All of this suggests that replicating the London Challenge across the North and the Midlands would be difficult, even if funding on that scale were available now and we were not facing the shortages in teachers and school leaders highlighted elsewhere in Wilshaw’s report.

What is missing from Wilshaw’s bullish refusal to tolerate under-performance is any recognition of the importance of the context in which schools operate. As social geographer [Danny Dorling](#) and others have demonstrated, London dominates the English economy in a way which is not replicated by the capitals of other countries. This means that what works in London, and why what works endures, may not apply elsewhere.

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Research published recently by IPPR North into [The State of the North](#) claims: “There is a 12-percentage-point ‘early years gap’ between the performance of the poorest children under the age of five in London and those in the North.” But as Wilshaw pointed out in his report and the graph above shows, there is no north-south divide among primary schools. We need to find out what primary schools in the North and the Midlands are doing so well to overcome their early disadvantage and what changes after the age of 11.

The north-east

Wilshaw highlights the north-east as an example of where things are going wrong at secondary level. What gets lost in his rush to identify the problem is that the two highest-performing local authorities in England at primary level – North Tyneside and Newcastle upon Tyne – are in the north-east. We need also to look at why that is the case.

The current policy concern with “[coasting schools](#)” means that the North-South divide in secondary schools is likely to concentrate politicians’ minds in the next few years.

What should be noted is that the government’s de facto solution for coasting schools – [converting more into academies](#) – is addressed rather gingerly in Wilshaw’s report. He states that academisation “can create the conditions for remarkable improvements” but is also clear that such structural reform has its limitations.

In Morgan's Newsnight interview she claimed that "academies have proved to be hugely successful". Like the drivers behind London and the London Challenge's improvement in school performance, that [remains contested](#).

If we are to address the divide Wilshaw has identified, we need less of this kind of assertion and a rather more nuanced understanding of the issues involved in improving school performance, learning and teaching at scale.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). [Read the original article](#).

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