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COMMENT: What is a coasting school?

[Professor Michael Jopling](#), from Education and Lifelong Learning at Northumbria, discusses the concept of 'coasting schools'.

Central to the new government's education policy is a [determination](#) to "tackle coasting schools". But what are "coasting" schools and why is the education secretary Nicky Morgan so exercised about them?

There is no agreed definition of a coasting school. New Labour saw coasting schools as those "at risk of failure" in its [2007 Children's Plan](#) but was unable to translate that concern into policy. This was perhaps partly due to the report's recognition that we needed to be better at identifying such schools.

The subsequent Conservative-led coalition was less circumspect. The Conservatives' concern with coasting schools can be traced back to 2011 and David Cameron's [speech to a free school in Norwich](#) where he identified coasting schools broadly as "the ones whose results have either flat-lined or where they haven't improved as much as they could have".

This resulted in a change in Ofsted's grading system. Before 2012, schools inspected by Ofsted could be judged outstanding, good, satisfactory, or inadequate. From 2012, the "satisfactory" rating became "requires improvement". This significant shift in tone enabled Michael Wilshaw, chief inspector of schools at the regulator Ofsted, to [define coasting schools in the following terms](#):

No schools will be allowed to remain in the category of 'requires improvement' for more than three years. Under the proposals, schools judged in this new category would be subject to earlier re-inspection, within 12-18 months, rather than up to three years as at the moment. Schools will be given up to two inspections within that three year period to demonstrate improvement.

What makes a school 'coast'?

If it has been difficult to define "coasting" schools, determining what makes a school "coast" is even more problematic. The research that has been done in this area tends to reflect the findings of school improvement and school effectiveness research. [A report in 2011 by the Royal Society for the Arts](#) into what were then still "satisfactory" schools found that "what came across overwhelmingly is the inconsistent quality of teaching and assessment practice within 'satisfactory' schools", and also identified problems with systems and monitoring, school leadership and governance, and engagement with parents.

They also highlighted the fact that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were over-represented at satisfactory schools and that school contexts had a significant impact. A New Labour [report on improving coasting secondary schools](#) in 2008 identified insufficient accountability and challenge and lack of focused awareness of key areas such as aspirations for pupils and effective pupil support strategies. Again, context was seen to be a crucial factor.

Morgan's new proposals

We are now beginning to find out what will happen to coasting schools that

fail to demonstrate improvement. The [Conservative Manifesto](#) stated:

Any school judged by Ofsted to be requiring improvement will be taken over by the best headteachers – backed by expert sponsors or high-performing neighbouring schools – unless it can demonstrate that it has a plan to improve rapidly.

Nicky Morgan won't tolerate coasting. Hannah McKay/EPA

Education secretary Nicky Morgan wasted no time in promoting this policy in both [an article in The Daily Telegraph](#) and an appearance on the [Andrew Marr Show](#) on May 17. In the article she wrote of the need to “extend our academies programme to tackle ‘coasting’ schools” and insisted:

These schools must improve too and will be put on immediate notice and required to work with our team of expert head teachers. Those that aren't able to demonstrate a clear plan for improvement will be given new leadership.

At the moment these policies remain very vague. [Ofsted identified](#) around 3,000 coasting schools in 2012. But as teacher and headteacher [shortages loom](#) and pressures on primary school places and school budgets increase, there is no indication of where all these “expert head teachers” will come from.

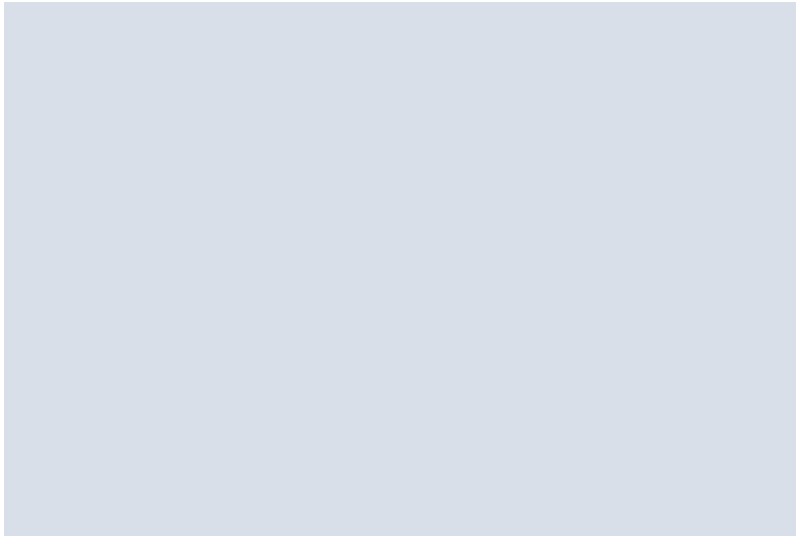
It is also not clear if this new leadership – and the sacking of existing headteachers – will be enough to prevent schools from being absorbed rather chillingly into the expanding academies programme. In her Telegraph article, Morgan said “we will speed up the process of turning schools into academies to make sure that new expert leadership is found for all schools that need it as quickly as possible”.

There has been no no acknowledgement in these proposals of the [criticisms](#) in the [House of Commons Education Committee's 2015 report on Academies and Free Schools](#), which found that there is still no evidence that academies, especially primary academies, are a positive force for change.

And crucially, there is no recognition of the importance of context when

looking at coasting schools and their future. Education policy since 2010 has been founded on ignoring the factors that influence children and young people's engagement at school and assuming that transferring successful practice between schools via academisation is straightforward.

There is no evidence yet that suggests this approach is effective. This is not to suggest that we should accept "coasting" schools, but that we need to understand them, and the localities they serve, much better before imposing wholesale change upon them.



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