

General Secretary's address to Annual Conference 2025

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EMBARGO

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EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 ON SATURDAY 15 MARCH**ASCL ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025, ACC LIVERPOOL****ASCL GENERAL SECRETARY PEPE DI'IASIO'S SPEECH**

Good morning, and welcome to day two of our Annual Conference.

I hope those of you who attended last night's Annual Dinner had a fantastic evening – and that any sore heads this morning are at least manageable.

Now, I'm well aware that a Saturday morning keynote comes with an added challenge. My job is not just to speak, but to keep us all awake – and ideally, energised for the day ahead.

That's a high bar, I know. But I'll give it my best shot.

Let me start with a story.

This is the tale of a well-known headmistress from North London.

I know what you're thinking ...

But no, in fact it isn't 'Britain's strictest headmistress' – but someone arguably even more fascinating. Meet Sophie Bryant.

She was the second headmistress of North London Collegiate School, following in the footsteps of the renowned 19th-century educator Frances Mary Buss.

You may recognise that name – Frances Mary Buss was one of the founders of the Association of Headmistresses, the organisation that would eventually evolve into what we now know as the Association of School and College Leaders.

Over the past year, we've been celebrating ASCL's 150th anniversary, and as part of those celebrations, I found myself at North London Collegiate School one Monday evening in early February for a small anniversary gathering. It was there that I learned more about the extraordinary life of Sophie Bryant.

This remarkable woman led the school until 1918. According to her Wikipedia entry, she was among the first women to earn a first-class honours degree, the first to receive a Doctor of Science in England, and – something I'm particularly delighted to share – one of the first women to own a bicycle.

But cycling was just the beginning. She also rowed, swam, and, incredibly, climbed the Matterhorn not once, but twice. In fact, she died in a hiking accident in the Alps at the age of 72 – still pursuing adventure to the very end.

I share this story not just to help keep everyone awake on a Saturday morning, but because it highlights some of the qualities that still define great education leaders today.

No, I'm not suggesting we should all set off to climb the Matterhorn. But what I do see in colleagues across our profession is the same belief in the power of education, the same thirst for knowledge, and – perhaps most importantly – the same resilience in the face of daunting challenges. That, I think, is what we still share with Sophie Bryant.

And we need that resilience now more than ever – together with a healthy dose of optimism. Because – let’s be honest – these are not easy times. As Manny highlighted yesterday, the theme of this conference is “*A Brighter Future*” – not just because it’s what we all want to see, but because we firmly believe that by working constructively with policymakers, we have the best chance of making it a reality.

With that in mind, let’s focus on solutions – on what we can do to tackle three key challenges head-on.

Given the intense pressure on public finances – and the government’s insistence that no additional funding is available – it is worth pointing out that two of these solutions won’t cost a penny and that the third may require investment up front but will ultimately save money in the long run.

First, I want to talk about accountability.

Right now, schools and colleges are grappling with crippling budget constraints and severe staff shortages. The last thing they need is an inspection system that intensifies the pressures they face.

And yet, incredibly, that’s exactly what’s being proposed.

Let me be clear: we fully support accountability.

Parents and taxpayers deserve an independent inspection system that gives them confidence in our schools and colleges. But accountability must be fair, proportionate, and constructive – not so overbearing that it damages staff wellbeing or so complex that it becomes impossible to implement reliably.

We support the principle of report cards. In fact, we’ve been advocating for a report card-based approach for years. But *not like this*.

Our suggestion – shared in detail with both Ofsted and the Department for Education last year – was something much simpler.

Schools and colleges should be judged against a clear set of expectations, set out in legislation, so they don’t change with the whim of every new chief inspector. Ofsted’s role should then be to assess whether a school has met each expectation – *yes or no*.

That, to us, felt like the right approach. As you can see, it’s a far cry from the Nando’s-style five-point scale Ofsted is proposing.

But there is still room for compromise: three grades instead of five.

We recognise the need to identify schools that are struggling and ensure they get high-quality support. There’s also a case for distinguishing between schools that need a little help and those requiring more attention.

But for the majority of schools – those performing well – ‘secure’ should suffice. There is no need to introduce excessive distinctions, sending the message that *good* isn’t *really* good enough, and that they should aspire to be ‘strong’ or ‘exemplary.’

That’s not to say excellence shouldn’t be recognised and shared. But must we slap a label on it? Rather than stretching the English language for more adjectives, why not include a dedicated space on the report card where inspectors can highlight strong practice?

We've called this, in discussions with Ofsted, a *three-and-a-half-point grading system*. It could still use Ofsted's proposed categories: 'causing concern,' 'attention needed,' and 'secure.' But it would step away from the flawed attempt to keep grading schools beyond this point.

This would be less damaging to leaders and teachers while still providing parents with clear, essential information.

Ofsted must rethink its current plans. There is still time to pull back from the brink of an approach that will quickly fall into disrepute and disarray. There is still time to deliver genuine improvement to an inspection system which has for far too long driven people out of teaching and leadership.

Next, I want to address the increasingly strained relationship between schools and some of our parents.

When I speak to colleagues across the country, many tell me they feel under siege from a growing culture of complaints.

These grievances aren't just directed at schools – they're escalated to Ofsted, the Teaching Regulation Agency, the Department for Education, and local authorities. And if that weren't enough, they are often amplified on social media, adding further pressure to already overstretched staff, who feel unable to respond.

We also see signs of this fractured relationship in pupil attendance.

Through Teacher Tapp, we recently repeated a question to state school teachers and leaders that we've asked before: What reasons have they been given for pupil absence this academic year? The results were revealing:

- Over 90% of teachers said families had taken pupils on holiday during term time.
- Eight in 10 reported pupils missing school for family events.
- And, strikingly, more than a third said pupils were kept home because a parent or carer was in dispute with the school.

Another major factor was school-related anxiety – highlighting the urgent need for better mental health support. But the other reasons point to a different issue.

We all know something changed in society after the Covid-19 pandemic. I can't pinpoint exactly why, but for some families, school seems to have become – at least in part – optional. And that mindset persists.

The blunt instrument of fines is not reversing this trend. Last year alone, a staggering 443,000 penalty notices were issued for unauthorised family holidays – an increase of 87,000 from the previous year.

But far from solving the problem, fines often deepen tensions between schools and parents. Schools, simply enforcing the rules, are left looking like the villains.

So, what's the solution?

For a start, ministers should engage with the travel industry to address the excessive cost of holidays during school breaks – a major driver of term-time absences.

But beyond that, we need a broader cultural shift. It's time to refresh and renew the social contract with a declaration agreed and developed by schools, government, and parents working together.

This means setting out clear expectations, the importance of following the rules for the collective good, and the proper channels for complaints.

Such an agreement should be developed, endorsed, and promoted by everyone with a stake in education. We need to speak with one voice.

Third, I want to turn to the crisis in the special educational needs system.

Since 2016, the number of children with SEND has risen dramatically. In England, those with an education, health and care plan has increased by 83%.

While funding has grown, it has failed to keep pace with rising demand. As we all know, the system is in crisis.

Local authorities are struggling to find appropriate placements. Families face long delays for EHC plans. Schools are doing their best to provide support but often lack the funding or specialist staff to meet children's needs. The result? A system that is failing too many young people.

I know the Education Secretary recognises the scale of the challenge and is committed to change – but action cannot come soon enough.

That's why we're pleased to have with us this morning Tom Rees, who is chairing the Department for Education's advisory group on inclusion. His work is a key part of the government's plans to address these deep-rooted issues, and we look forward to hearing from him shortly.

But before that, here are some thoughts of our own.

Funding matters. But if we want a better system, we also need a different approach.

- Every teacher must be a teacher of children with SEND, and every leader must be a leader of children with SEND. That means equipping them with the right training and support.
- Every education policy must be viewed through the lens of SEND. We need a system that works for all children, not just some.
- Every school must have access to the specialists they need. Speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, and other professionals must be readily available to support children early.
- We must identify needs sooner and act faster. Early intervention is key – not only to keeping more children in mainstream education but also to easing the pressure on special school places and reducing the reliance on costly independent provision.

Ultimately, fixing the SEND system is about sustainability. But more than that, it's about ensuring children get the support they need, when they need it. Because at the heart of this crisis are young people whose futures depend on us getting this right.

I want to leave you with a summary of what I've tried to set out today.

The challenges we face – no matter how daunting – are not insurmountable. Throughout history, those who have made the greatest impact in education have done so not by dwelling on obstacles, but by finding ways to overcome them. Progress has always been driven by those with the resilience to push forward, the vision to see a better way, and the determination to make it happen. By people like you.

Which brings me back to Sophie Bryant – and to Frances Mary Buss, for that matter – both of whom were not easily deterred. They believed, unwaveringly, in the power of education to transform lives and shape a better society. That legacy of determination and purpose is one we strive to continue today.

To be clear, I won't be scaling the Matterhorn this summer – my idea of a perfect holiday involves a golf course and a good book. But I am inspired by these formidable figures in ASCL's history and the principles they stood for – principles that still drive us forward all these years later.

I want to end today with a few words of thanks.

First, to our sponsors – Unifrog, Education Mutual, and Google for Education – and to everyone who has supported this event, including all those who have contributed to our fantastic education exhibition. Please do take the time to visit as many stands as you can.

A huge thank you as well to our outstanding speakers – both those delivering keynote addresses here on the main stage and those leading our wide-ranging workshops. Your insights and expertise make this conference what it is.

To the incredible ASCL team and the staff here at ACC Liverpool – thank you for all your hard work behind the scenes.

And finally, my thanks to you – our delegates. We know how incredibly busy your lives are, and we deeply appreciate the time you've taken to be here.

Leading a school or college is no easy task. In a world where some examples of leadership in the wider world are too often negative, divisive, and confrontational, young people need a different kind of 'influencer' in their lives.

More than ever, they need role models who embody ethical and moral standards – people they can respect, rely on, and aspire to be.

Never underestimate your power to influence. As highly regarded civic leaders, your impact extends far beyond your school or college gates. You set the standards across your institutions. You shape the culture of your communities. You are the example young people look to.

Make no mistake – the success of any government policy, initiative, or new framework rests on the shoulders of the people in this room.

It is you who can help provide a brighter future.

And please remember this: ASCL is here for you.

We proudly represent members in the state and independent sectors; in special, primary and secondary schools, in trust central teams, in colleges and sixth forms, and in alternative

provision settings; in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and through our affiliation with School Leaders Scotland.

Wherever you are, we're on your side. Whether it's through our membership hotline, our newsletters, or our meetings with ministers and policymakers, we are working for you and with you.

Because as we say at ASCL: "*We speak on behalf of school and college leaders, and we act on behalf of children and young people.*"

I like to think Sophie Bryant and Frances Mary Buss would be proud of that.

Enjoy the rest of the conference and thank you for listening.