

President's address to Annual Conference 2025

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ACC, Liverpool

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EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 ON FRIDAY 14 MARCH**ASCL CONFERENCE 2025, ACC LIVERPOOL****ASCL PRESIDENT MANNY BOTWE'S SPEECH**

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 2025 ASCL Conference here in Liverpool.

It's fantastic to be back in this great city and this wonderful venue for the second year running. And even more fantastic to see so many of you here today.

I want to begin with a heartfelt thank you to all our guests for joining us. A special mention, too, to the incredible jazz band from our school – what a performance! Your talent and energy have set the perfect tone for the day, so thank you again for sharing your music with us.

And of course, my thanks to Pepe for that kind introduction.

It is an absolute privilege to stand before you as your President, and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to address you all.

Now, before I go any further, I have to admit – delivering a big speech like this is always a little nerve-wracking. It's a bit like the feeling at the start of an Ofsted visit.

You're never quite sure how it's going to go... and you just pray you don't get rated 'inadequate' before the end of your first sentence.

Although, of course, I should update that reference to reflect the more enlightened language of the new inspection framework.

I'm no longer worried about being rated 'inadequate' – because now I'll simply be 'causing concern.' Which, I think we can all agree, is much fairer.

As I stand here today, I can't help but reflect on where I've come from. I grew up in South London, in a council house, raised by a single mother. No one in my family had ever been to university.

But I had something that made all the difference – teachers who believed in me.

Teachers like Mr. Robson, Mr. Reid, Mr. McKeown, and Mrs. Furlong – people who saw potential in me when others might not have. They never let me settle for less than my best. They pushed, encouraged, and challenged me to aim higher. And it is because of them that I stand before you today.

Now, a decade into my role as headteacher of Tytherington School in Macclesfield, I carry that same belief in the power of education.

Every two years, we take a whole-school photo. You can imagine the challenge of fitting everyone in. As headteacher, I'm the last piece of the puzzle, standing at the back, looking out across the entire school.

And in that moment, it really hits you – the sheer diversity of young lives we serve. In front of me are students destined for Oxford and Cambridge; future doctors, lawyers, and scientists; future shopkeepers, web designers, and engineers – each carving their own path. And alongside them are students who struggle to read and write, some even at risk of

crossing paths with the criminal justice system. Yet all of them deserve the same opportunities to thrive.

Every single one of them has potential. Every single one of them deserves the best possible start in life.

That is our duty and our privilege – not just to equip them with knowledge, but to shape them into good people. Young people with empathy, a sense of community, and a love of place.

Because education isn't just about grades. It's about shaping futures.

Today's young people face challenges that are vastly different from those of previous generations. Their world is shaped by smartphones, social media, memes, and influencers – forces that shape their identities, interactions, and even their mental wellbeing.

This technology has brought incredible benefits, connecting people across continents, fostering creativity, and expanding access to knowledge. But as we all know, it has a darker side.

It leaves a trail of harm – safeguarding concerns, fractured friendships, bullying, anxiety, and the spread of extremist ideologies. And increasingly, it is being weaponised against schools and teachers, with disgruntled parents using it as a platform to target staff.

For this conference, we worked with Teacher Tapp to gather feedback from teachers and school leaders on the social media-related issues they've seen since September. Their responses are deeply troubling.

- Nearly three-quarters of secondary school teachers reported that students had been bullied by peers on social media.
- Almost half said that students had recorded teachers or other pupils without permission.
- Nearly a third reported noticing signs of students having accessed pornographic or violent content.
- And over 40% of teachers – in both primary and secondary schools – said that parents had made negative comments about their school or staff online.

This chaos must end. For too long, tech billionaires have been given immense power without accountability. They hide behind the defence that they are champions of free speech while profiting from platforms that allow harm to fester.

But enough is enough. It is time to bring these platforms to heel and force them to police their own spaces. While we welcome the Online Safety Act we have yet to see its protections come into force and or how effective they prove in practice.

As a society, we have the right to demand the protection of our children, the enforcement of decency, and the upholding of standards. That right must be asserted.

I want to turn now to the theme of this conference – a brighter future. Because that is what we all want. For our students. For our schools, trusts and colleges. And for our education system as a whole.

In fact, inspired by a certain U.S. president, I've even come up with a slogan: Make Education Great Again.

Or, for short – MEGA.

Just imagine the government's spin machine running with that. MEGA policies pouring out of the doors of the Department for Education, each one promising transformation.

And since we have the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, addressing us shortly, I'd like to offer her that slogan – completely free of charge.

I think you'll agree – it has a bit more punch than "*high and rising standards.*"

I digress. In any case, back in June 2024, when we chose the theme of a brighter future for this conference, there was a real sense of optimism.

We were looking forward to the possibility of a new government, a chance to reset the relationship with policymakers, and an opportunity to work together on co-constructing a better future for education.

A future where the outcomes for students do not depend on where they grow up, how rich their families are, or whether they have special educational needs.

A future where everyone gets access to a high-quality curriculum, including enrichment opportunities such as music, the arts, and sport.

Many of us, I am sure, shared that same sense of optimism when the new Labour government was elected. We welcomed the change of tone from the Secretary of State and the attempt to build a more constructive relationship with the profession.

We welcomed the government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity for every child and young person. We share that mission. In fact, it's what drives us every day – it's why we became teachers, why we became leaders, and why education exists in the first place.

This very goal was at the heart of ASCL's Blueprint for a Fairer Education System, which we set out four years ago. So, in principle, the Labour government and ASCL are aligned.

And as the voice of the profession, we have a critical role in ensuring that education policies are shaped by those who truly understand the challenges on the ground – you.

However, it's not enough to know *what* the government wants to achieve. The missing piece is *how*. We need more than just a destination – we need a roadmap. What does "*high and rising standards*" actually look like in practice? And what's the strategy to get there?

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is a significant piece of legislation, covering a wide range of issues. But right now, it feels fragmented. A bit on breakfast clubs, a bit on school uniforms, some tweaks to admissions and pay processes – a smorgasbord of policies of varying degrees of usefulness which lacks a clear, overarching vision.

We're not expecting another Education Act on the scale of 1944 or 1988. But we do need to see how these individual policies fit into a wider plan to create real, lasting change – the kind that is essential to breaking down the barriers to opportunity.

And speaking of those breakfast clubs – a daily funding rate of 60p per child is absurd. You can't promise parents a nutritious meal and 30 minutes of childcare, then expect schools to deliver it for less than half the price of a Greggs sausage roll.

Meanwhile, the immense resource challenges we faced under the previous government have not disappeared. Funding shortages, staff recruitment and retention struggles, and an overstretched education system – these issues persist, and tackling them must be a shared priority.

This week, just before leaving for the conference, I took a snapshot of my inbox – a typical day in the life of a school leader.

Among the urgent issues waiting for me: staff absence, a presentation on budget cuts, an EHCP consultation, a job vacancy advert, a phone call to a mum, an independent review panel decision, parking complaints, a CPOMs alert, restructuring papers, flooding in J Block, a complaint on Facebook, and Year 11 attendance concerns.

This is the daily reality for senior leaders. Some days, it feels like we are the nation's unofficial fourth emergency service – always on call, always responding, always firefighting the next crisis.

Amidst all of this, the proposed changes to the Ofsted framework feel like a kick in the teeth. We are already under enormous pressure, balancing the needs of our students with increasingly limited resources. More accountability, more high-stakes scrutiny – this won't solve the recruitment and retention crisis. It will make it worse.

What we need is an inspection framework that supports and strengthens schools and colleges, not one that piles on stress and anxiety.

Despite all the challenges, school and college leaders remain, by nature, optimists and problem solvers. But we cannot solve those challenges alone. The government must act. While we can offer advice, expertise, and collaboration, only the government holds the levers to drive real change.

First, it is simply appalling that in the United Kingdom, 4.3 million children live in poverty. This is not just a statistic – it's a crisis. Children cannot learn, grow, or thrive if they are cold, hungry, and living in inadequate housing. No child should have to endure such hardship. This is why ending child poverty must become a national priority.

We cannot stand by and watch as young lives are ruined by circumstances beyond their control. As an immediate step, we must ensure that all families in receipt of Universal Credit are entitled to free school meals. And to make sure no child misses out, we must implement automatic enrolment for all those who are eligible.

The future of our children is at stake, and we must act – now.

Our children with special educational needs and disabilities are being let down. They are missing out on vital support because of delays in education, health, and care plans. Schools are struggling to afford the costs of SEND provision, and we are facing a shortage of places in special schools to meet growing demand. The whole system is on the brink of collapse, and we cannot allow this to continue. We must act now to ensure that every child with SEND gets the support they need to thrive and succeed.

The funding crisis in our schools and colleges cannot be ignored any longer. Across the country, schools are being forced to set deficit budgets and plan for further cuts. This is

simply unsustainable. Education is not a cost, it is an investment – in our children, in our future, and in our country. If we are serious about building a society that values and supports its young people, we must prioritise education funding and ensure our schools and colleges have the resources they need to deliver the best possible education to every student.

Education is only as strong as the teachers who deliver it. Yet, we face a growing crisis – a shortage of teachers driven by years of uncompetitive pay, relentless workloads driven by system-wide pressures, and an accountability system that too often punishes rather than supports.

The solution is clear. We must improve pay to ensure teaching remains an attractive profession. We must reduce excessive workloads so teachers can focus on what truly matters – teaching and supporting students. And we must replace punitive accountability with a system that values and trusts our educators.

If we fail to act, we risk losing not just teachers but the very foundation of our education system. But if we invest in them, we invest in a future where every child benefits from passionate, dedicated professionals who are supported, valued, and empowered to make a difference.

Equally important are the pay and conditions of all the other staff who are essential to the education system, including business leaders and support staff.

We must invest too in the support services that children and families desperately need. The decimation of Sure Start centres, coupled with the lack of capacity in social care and mental health services, has left schools and colleges to pick up the pieces. Teachers and school staff cannot be expected to fill the gaps left by the erosion of vital services. We need to reinvest in specialist support for vulnerable children so that schools can focus on what they do best – educating and empowering the next generation. Every child deserves a fair start, and that starts with the right support.

And finally, the government and Ofsted must rethink their current consultation proposals. More high-stakes accountability is not the answer. We need a system that is genuinely supportive, a framework that helps schools and colleges improve rather than simply judging them. Inspection must be about collaboration and support, not fear and punishment.

You'll hear more about all this from Pepe tomorrow.

But over the next hour we're going to welcome to this stage His Majesty's Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver and Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson and you'll have the opportunity to hear directly from them. I think it's fair to say that they probably won't agree with everything that I've said in this speech. And you may not agree with everything you hear from them. And that's okay.

But let's take a page from one of our speakers, Alastair Campbell, who often talks about the importance of disagreeing agreeably.

So, let's listen, engage, maybe even applaud – and then, of course, have those passionate debates we're known for.

After all, that's the ASCL way!

Tomorrow, we'll also hear from Professor Becky Francis, Chair of the Curriculum and Assessment Review. While I don't know exactly what her review will recommend, I want to take this opportunity to make a special plea on behalf of the forgotten third.

You'll likely be familiar with this phrase – it refers to the third of young people each year who, despite their best efforts, fall short of the grade 4 benchmark in GCSE English and maths.

These students then face the harsh reality of relentless resits in post-16 education – an exhausting and demoralising process that is not only often unproductive but ultimately damaging. For many, it chips away at their confidence, leaving them with little belief in their ability to succeed. And for those who still don't achieve that elusive grade 4 – the majority – it severely limits their future opportunities.

No exam system should carry such high stakes.

It's been over five years since ASCL highlighted the plight of the forgotten third in a landmark report. Since then, we've heard plenty of talk, but not enough action. The forgotten third remains a persistent feature of our education system and, by extension, our society, where it deepens social divisions and perpetuates generational disadvantage.

There is, however, an opportunity to address this issue through the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Imagine a system where assessment in literacy and numeracy is not based on ranking students against each other but instead operates more like a driving test – with students assessed against a pre-determined standard in proficiency-style assessments, rather than high-stakes academic exams.

Such a shift would allow the vast majority of students to leave secondary school with a qualification they can be proud of, while enabling us to focus our efforts on supporting those who didn't meet the standard during post-16 education.

This is not a retreat on standards; it is a means of embedding essential literacy and numeracy skills – the very skills employers demand. It is simply unnecessary and unfair to accept that a third of young people should be sacrificed as acceptable collateral damage.

So, to the Curriculum and Assessment Review: be bold. And to the government: don't stand in the way of meaningful reform in the name of a skewed, outdated view of what "*high and rising standards*" really mean.

We have an exciting and enriching conference ahead – one that offers a tremendous opportunity to engage in CPD, to network with colleagues, and to collaborate with educators from across the country. This is a time to reflect on our collective journey, recharge our spirits, and strengthen our resolve to continue making a lasting difference in the lives of the young people we serve.

We are not just here to discuss challenges, but to spark change, to share ideas that will shape the future of education, and to renew our commitment to the students who depend on us. The work we do is not easy, but it is vital – and this conference is a chance to remember just how much impact we can have when we come together as a community of educators.

I also want to express my gratitude to our generous sponsors. Their partnership makes this conference possible, enabling us to collaborate, share insights, and continue driving positive change in our education system.

And don't forget to visit the education exhibition during the conference. It's an excellent opportunity to explore the latest tools, resources, and solutions that can help us all improve and innovate in our schools and colleges.

As we look forward, I'd like to leave you with the words of Desmond Tutu: "*Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.*"

You are the light. You are the hope that guides the future of our education system. Your work, your dedication, and your passion are the beacons that will lead us through the challenges we face.

Let this conference ignite a new energy in all of us, so that when we leave here, we are not only more informed, but more inspired to tackle the issues ahead. Together, we will continue to make a difference – not just for today, but for generations to come.

Thank you, and I hope you have an inspiring and productive conference.