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EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 SATURDAY 14 MARCH

ASCL General Secretary's speech to ASCL Annual Conference 2026

Good morning colleagues, and welcome to Day 2 of ASCL Annual Conference.

I hope you had an enjoyable time at our President's drinks reception last night.

Some of you may have gone on elsewhere afterwards to sample some of the great hospitality that Liverpool has to offer.

But I recognise that while the night may still have been young ...

... some of us are not ...

... and you may have opted for an early night instead.

Whichever course you chose, I hope you feel energised for an exciting day ahead.

And what a fantastic programme we have for you.

It starts off with the brilliant Frank Cottrell-Boyce who you'll hear from in a few minutes.

We're very pleased to have with us the Children's Laureate in this National Year of Reading.

And that got me thinking about how the great works of children's literature portray schools ...

... and how these schools might have fared under Ofsted's new inspection framework.

After all, when the worlds of the imagination and accountability collide what could go wrong?

Take Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Inclusion might be ... a challenge.

Admissions policies lack transparency and appear to be administered by owls.

The practice of dividing students into houses using a magical sorting hat is arbitrary, unmoderated, and risks reinforcing stereotypes at the point of entry.

On the positive side, inspectors praised recent student-led initiatives aimed at ending the mistreatment of house elves – a promising example of pupil voice in action.

Behaviour?

While most students behave well, those in Slytherin House lack consistent guidance and are frequently found to be in thrall to the Dark Lord.

The curriculum?

'Defence Against the Dark Arts' places disproportionate emphasis on duelling evil wizards while entirely neglecting the modern threats posed by social media algorithms.

Leadership?

The headteacher's habit of randomly awarding "10 points to Gryffindor" during moments of personal enthusiasm risks undermining wider perceptions of fairness across the school community.

And that's before inspectors even reach safeguarding.

Flying lessons for first years.

Full-contact Quidditch played several hundred feet in the air.

And a curriculum enrichment programme that appears to involve introducing small children to a range of lethal magical beasts.

Fortunately, the headteacher and the senior team at Hogwarts are, of course, members of ASCL

... and have already contacted me through our Tell Us inbox.

Particularly with regards to their behaviour and attendance judgement where they feel the conduct of Slytherin House unfairly brings down the wider reputation of the school.

But on with the business of the day – which is my keynote address to you.

I am going to talk today about kindness.

It isn't a word that crops up a lot in policy documents and speeches.

But it is the lynchpin on which everything else turns.

Because kindness lies at the heart of education.

It is closely related to the idea of kinship – that there are bonds which tie us together, that we have a moral duty to look after one another as we would members of our own families.

When the great pioneers of our school and college system envisaged education for all, this was at the heart of their thinking.

They saw it as a social good, something which changed lives for the better, and, in doing so, made for a happier, fairer, and more prosperous society.

And when we talk today about inclusion, of doing better for students who face the greatest challenges, that too comes from the same sense of social responsibility.

We've recently seen a white paper which seeks to take the next step in that journey.

It envisages a much greater level of support for children with special educational needs.

For most, that support would be available in mainstream schools, close to their homes, avoiding long journeys to specialist provision.

It would identify their needs earlier than often happens now, and ensure the right support is put in place sooner.

And it would enable schools to draw on the expertise they need – educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and other specialists – when they need them.

These are laudable plans – but they are just that – plans.

They are words in a document, a set of aspirations, which are several years away from becoming a reality.

Everything in that white paper now depends on the most important part of any plan – delivery.

And let's be clear, that comes down to the people in this room.

It won't be government ministers, officials, or advisers who provide the support these children need.

It will be you.

That is, as the saying goes, both a challenge and an opportunity.

The challenge is obvious.

These reforms represent massive change. They ask a great deal more of schools and colleges which are already stretched to breaking point.

They expect leaders and teachers to reshape the special educational needs system while struggling with many pressures, funding shortages, and workloads which are already unsustainable.

As Jo Rowley said in her speech yesterday, there is a welfare crisis in our workforce.

The government must recognise that this is a real and present danger – both to the wellbeing of education staff and to the success of its reforms.

It must work with the profession on a wellbeing plan, and it must ensure the funding is in place for the provision it expects our schools and colleges to deliver.

The rest is down to us.

And that is an opportunity to do something seismic.

Something historic.

Something that transforms more lives and builds a stronger and more compassionate society.

To take that next step on the path begun by those educational pioneers – a path built on the principles of kinship, and of kindness.

But kindness also extends to how we treat ourselves.

Whenever I talk to school and college leaders, I see two things.

The first is people who care deeply about their students and staff – people who want to make the right decisions amid the endless stream of challenges that land on their desks every day.

The second is people who are often exhausted.

I daresay that many of the people in this hall spend most of their weekends recovering from the week that has just gone ... and preparing for the week ahead.

It is no way to live.

There has to be space in our lives for ourselves.

Time to enjoy being with family and friends without constantly checking emails.

Time when our minds are not drifting back to the unresolved items on our to-do-lists.

There have to be moments when you are not a school or college leader ...

... but simply a mum or a dad.

A brother or a sister.

A son or a daughter.

Make space for those moments – and cherish them.

When you do that, you model that behaviour, you also help your staff to do the same.

You show them that being a brilliant educator does not mean that you cannot be anything else.

Kindness must also extend to how we treat one another in the education workforce.

I am about to stray into slightly more difficult territory now – but I believe these things need to be said.

First, our member support hotline often takes calls from traumatised members who are in very difficult situations in their working lives.

In some case, this includes being treated by employers in a way that is, frankly, unethical.

Let me say immediately that I recognise this is not how most employers behave.

However, some do – heaping excessive workloads and expectations on individuals in a way that feels very close to bullying.

This type of behaviour is simply unacceptable. It has no place anywhere in society let alone in an education system which seeks to uphold strong moral values.

It must stop.

Second, over the past 12 months or so, we have received too many reports of local industrial disputes in which our members have been targeted in a way that is personal and vindictive.

I recognise that feelings often run high in these situations.

But I want to say publicly today that leadership teams must be treated with the professional courtesy and respect that everyone in this profession deserves.

Let me be absolutely clear.

We will not tolerate this behaviour.

And we will always stand up for our members.

Finally, I want to say something about kindness in our wider society – and in our national politics.

It seems to me – and I am sure to many of us in this hall – that we have seen in recent years the insidious return of prejudice and division in our country.

Perhaps, I am being naïve.

Perhaps these attitudes never really disappeared – but simply remained hidden in the shadows.

However, it feels that things are now said and done in plain sight that would not have been said or done a few years ago.

As school and college leaders, we are well-placed to see the impact that this has on our communities and students.

Education is the glue that holds communities together.

We teach the values that unite our society – tolerance, respect, understanding.

And our schools and colleges are places where children from all backgrounds meet one another and become friends.

I am dismayed when I hear some politicians and commentators talk about multiculturalism as a failed experiment.

They have obviously never visited many of our schools and colleges where it is alive and well and a source of inspiration and joy.

These are places where we celebrate diversity.

As the son of an immigrant, I take pride in everything that my father has contributed to his community.

And I worry when I see some politicians speaking about immigration as a problem that needs to be solved, indulging in some sort of arms race about how tough they are going to be on those who come to our country seeking asylum.

I worry when I see flags tied to lampposts – as we did last summer – something which seems more like a brand of provocative nationalism than of proud patriotism.

And I worry about the role that social media platforms play in amplifying these divisions – allowing people with strong views to retreat into echo chambers where those views are endlessly reinforced.

I recognise that others may have a different view. They may feel this is merely a case of citizens exercising their right to free speech and airing matters of legitimate concern.

But I would encourage everyone to take care with the language they use.

Words and actions have consequences in the real world.

They create an environment in which we see many of our students, staff and families living in fear, and facing racial harassment or even violence.

This is not the bad-old days of the 1930s or the 1970s that we are talking about.

It is happening right now in modern-day Britain.

I do not pretend that there are easy answers to these challenges.

But I do believe there is a role for government to play in discussing with the profession how we respond.

And I certainly think that social media platforms must take far greater responsibility for policing their platforms and removing toxic content.

If they are not going to do that voluntarily, they should be made to do so through regulation.

To finish this keynote address, I looked for some quotes from famous figures about the importance of kindness.

The first is credited to the author Henry James who said:

“Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.”

When I read that, I was struck by how similar it is in construction to Tony Blair’s famous line:

“Ask me my three main priorities for government, and I tell you: education, education and education.”

That fits remarkably well with the theme of this speech.

But I think my favourite quote about kindness is even shorter and comes from Michelle Obama:

“When they go low, we go high.”

Goodness knows we could do with a little more of that among some of our politicians.

Finally, let me end by thanking everyone who has made this event possible.

To ASCL President Jo Rowley for setting the tone so well in her opening address yesterday.

To all of our keynote speakers and workshop presenters.

To our superb ASCL staff who have worked on this conference for many months with their customary calm efficiency and good humour.

To the staff here at the ACC Liverpool for making us so welcome.

To our brilliant exhibitors and sponsors, without whom none of this would be possible.

And, most of all, to you – our delegates – for taking the time out of your very busy working lives to be here with us in Liverpool.

I hope that when you leave this conference you will be able to take back with you a fresh set of insights and ideas.

But, most of all, I hope it has given you the opportunity to pause for a few moments in your busy lives and have the space you need to reflect and refresh.

It is an honour and a privilege to have had this opportunity to address you.

Thank you for listening, and enjoy the rest of conference.