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**EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 FRIDAY 13 MARCH**

## **ASCL President's speech to ASCL Annual Conference 2026**

Good morning everyone and welcome to the 2026 ASCL Annual Conference here in Liverpool.

It is fantastic to be back in this amazing city and even more fantastic to see so many of you here today.

I am delighted to be joined by our choir from Walton High School in Stafford as part of this conference. I am so, so proud of our students and staff.

To stand on this stage and perform to such a big audience is both an opportunity of a lifetime and the scariest thing in the world.

Can we give them another huge round of applause.

Thank you to Pepe for the introduction, and we look forward to hearing more tomorrow in your General Secretary's address.

But today it is my responsibility to open this Conference in a manner which I hope will reflect our shared experience and hopes as school and college leaders.

I have to admit it is pretty daunting standing up in front of so many of my peers. And it isn't helped by the fact that today is none other than Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

But I am inspired by the fact that in America they are today celebrating an occasion aimed at debunking such superstitions.

It is called '*National Open an Umbrella Indoors Day.*'

As a scientist I love that notion. It helps to remind me that our fate is in our own hands.

Which is, in many ways, the message of what follows.

Incidentally, I also discovered that Americans today celebrate '*National Earmuff Day.*'

I'm not sure what lesson to draw from that – other than the fact that somewhere in the world there's an occasion for everything.

In any event, here goes.

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First let me say that it is an honour and a privilege to stand before you as President and have the opportunity to speak to so many fellow members today.

As I stand here, I reflect on where I have come from.

I grew up in Walsall in the West Midlands – a region defined by its industrial history as the Black Country.

That is because the soot and smoke billowing from the factory chimneys back in the day turned everything black – buildings, washing hung out on lines – everything turned black.

If you have ever watched the television series *Peaky Blinders*, you'll have seen the images of ash falling from the sky, almost like snow.

That is pretty much the environment my parents grew up in.

It was a working-class community where people left education at the earliest opportunity to work in the local factory and help support their household financially.

This meant that none of our parents had any academic qualifications nor any real experience of the education system.

When I was growing up there, in the 1970s and 80s, unemployment was high and rising.

None of my friends really expected much from school and many of them voted with their feet – often truanting for weeks at a time with nobody appearing to check up on them.

Others left school altogether at the earliest opportunity – either through teenage pregnancy or because their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday fell before 31 January and they were therefore allowed to leave at Easter before sitting any exams.

Incredibly, this option to leave at Easter remained legal until 1997 – two years after I began teaching.

When I think about this in respect of safeguarding alone, it sends a shiver down my spine – let alone the missed opportunities for so many of my peers.

It was a story of bright children who were trapped in a cycle of low expectations and underachievement which continued through the generations.

Thankfully, things are very different now – and that transformation has been brought about by people like you.

The people who lead our schools and colleges.

Who refuse to accept that destinies are set in stone.

Who believe in the power of education to change lives and to build a better, fairer society.

What I remember from my personal experience is how this was exemplified by my own teachers.

Whether it was Mr Baker, who inspired me to become a chemistry teacher, or Mr Brown, the deputy head, who was always out and about in the school making time to listen to us ...

... there were always adults around me in school that motivated and encouraged.

They never gave up on us – no matter how fruitless it may have sometimes seemed.

Instead, through commitment and hard work, they showed that they believed in our ability to step into a world which was very different from the one in which our parents grew up.

Going on to sit A levels and move away from home to go to university was absolutely life-changing for me.

Being able to enter adulthood with decent qualifications, general knowledge, and the skills for a graduate profession was unimaginable just one generation before me.

I still pinch myself now when I think about it.

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We live in very different times today. Our society has undergone huge economic, social and technological changes.

And an enormous amount of progress has been made over the past 30 years in raising educational standards and supporting children.

But despite all that progress there are still many children out there who are much like that childhood version of me.

Where chaotic lives and complex social problems make it difficult to focus on school and where learning does not seem a priority.

Where families sometimes see no value in education because they are so ground down by the poverty and lack of opportunities in their communities.

And these children need the modern-day equivalent of Mr Baker and Mr Brown – the teachers who lifted my horizons.

Teachers who inspire and support them, teachers who believe in them.

And that responsibility, is, of course, our responsibility. It is the mission which gets us up in the morning – no matter the challenges.

It is the core belief that drives us on and which informs everything that we do.

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In my role as President, I'm often asked about my proudest moment as a school leader.

I can tell you what it wasn't.

It wasn't the hours I spent developing a new diploma curriculum – only to see it never actually implemented in our area due to a change of government.

Or the time I had to set up a Covid-testing centre overnight after a Downing Street briefing the previous evening which triggered an avalanche of calls from worried parents.

Ah yes, the pandemic.

I recall desperately looking for some sort of positive amidst the chaos. This, I thought, is a really good opportunity to teach children about germ theory.

How disease spreads, why mass vaccinations are important, and how all those graphs in the government briefings will come in handy as teaching resources.

But what I am actually proud of is something else entirely, and will stay with me long after I have retired.

It is when a child I have taught and supported feels safer, happier, and more fulfilled because of the impact I have been able to have on their life.

I recently sorted through some old school paperwork and came across a note from a student called Maisie who was in one of my classes during the pandemic

In that note, Maisie says how she felt safe and looked after in my lessons, how she knows that she matters to me.

That is special, and I am sure you all have similar examples from your own careers.

It is why teaching is such an incredible career choice and why school and college leadership plays such a vital role in our education system.

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Which brings me to the theme of this conference *Forward Together*.

It reflects the fact that we have come a long way as an education system – great schools, great colleges, high standards – all driven by a deeply ingrained moral purpose to do the very best we can for every child and young person.

But there is still work to be done.

We have in our education system, and in our society, a persistent gap between the haves and have-nots.

With children from disadvantaged communities, and those with special educational needs, frequently falling into the latter category.

Raising their horizons – as mine were raised – is the key to taking our education system to the next level, and in turn creating a country which is both fair and thriving.

But this cannot be achieved by schools and colleges alone.

It must be a joint project with all partners in education – particularly policymakers and parents – working alongside educators in common cause.

All-too-often we have seen how education policy which is poorly thought-through becomes yet another burden.

And how a minority of parents with unreasonable expectations and short tempers are a drain on time, energy, and resources.

These pressures are leading to an exodus from the profession.

Schools and colleges are asked to do ever-more with ever-less – all while managing inappropriate complaints and behaviour from some families.

We see colleagues – often seasoned professionals with many years of experience – simply buckling under the strain.

There is a welfare crisis in our schools and colleges, and this is simply not sustainable.

In all of the reams of education policy pouring out of Westminster this is an area which is scandalously overlooked and ignored.

And yet it is key to everything.

We cannot raise standards to the next level ...

or improve the fortunes of the forgotten third ..

...or reduce the nearly million young people who are 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' ...

... if the education workforce is broken on the wheel of too many expectations and not enough support.

Of all the statistics which poured out of the education sector last year there is one that should be ringing the loudest of alarm bells.

It is a survey from the Education Support charity which found that more than a third of education staff are at risk of probable clinical depression.

We cannot go on like this. It is simply not acceptable.

Pepe will talk about this more tomorrow. But I can tell you that the caseload being managed by ASCL's member support services has never been higher, and the calls to our hotline never more desperate.

So, I would make this appeal to the government – and I say this with the Secretary of State due to appear on this stage later this morning.

Work with ASCL to improve the wellbeing of the education workforce, recognising that this is the vital resource upon which all policies and aspirations rely.

Dial down the volume of policy announcements – particularly the ones that come out of the blue via press releases.

And sense-check them against the capacity of schools and colleges – in terms of money and staffing – so that we are actually able to deliver those expectations.

Work with us also on a national campaign to talk to parents about the importance of supporting their schools and colleges.

The importance of their children following the rules for the benefit of all students.

And if they are unhappy about something, the importance of making complaints in a polite and reasonable manner.

As I say, most parents know this already and they work very productively with their schools and colleges.

But some parents are clearly struggling to deal with the pressures in their own lives, and their behaviour is very challenging.

The huge amount of work and stress they generate detracts from other children, undermines behaviour policies, and contributes to the pressures which drive people out of teaching.

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At ASCL, we really do support much of what the government is doing.

We commend the rollout of a new wave of family hubs.

The value placed on further education in boosting priority skills vital to the economy.

Steps being taken to tackle the appalling rate of child poverty in this country.

The huge extension of childcare support which is taking place.

The efforts to reform a SEND system which is just not coping with the levels of need.

And they do listen.

But for all the good work that the government is doing – and this is the major caveat – everything relies in the end on schools and colleges having the funding necessary to deliver all the expectations placed upon them.

And that is simply not the current reality. Many of our schools and colleges are running on a mixture of goodwill and fumes.

And instead of adequate funding and resources, we instead see Ofsted increasingly used as the lever to force schools and colleges which are already at breaking point to do even more, and the outcome is predictable.

And this bears repeating ...

More than a third of education staff are at risk of probable clinical depression.

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This brings us on to the question of recruitment and retention. For many years we've lived with huge gaps in the education workforce.

In short, we don't recruit enough trainee teachers into the profession, and then we lose far too many early in their careers.

The result is that many of us struggle to recruit subject specialists and it is often schools serving disadvantaged communities which struggle the most.

Part of our aim in this year's conference is to promote teaching as the brilliant, fulfilling career that we know it can be.

This is something that is rooted in our experience of working in schools – the joy that comes from working with children.

Those unique and sometimes bizarre conversations that only young people can instigate and which make every day different and special.

We can and must tell that story at every opportunity.

But there is also no doubt that we need system-level change which addresses the barriers to people becoming teachers.

I have spoken today about the wellbeing crisis which is affecting the profession. Closely connected to this is the issue of excessive workloads.

We have talked about this for years, but it never seems to get any better.

This is particularly the case with those in leadership positions where the days and weeks often never seem to end.

All of us who go into leadership do so with our eyes open.

We know it is a tough gig, and we accept that there is always a lot to do.

But there is a point at which it just isn't humanly possible to keep on taking on more and more tasks.

And many leaders are at that point.

This isn't good for them, and it isn't good for the education system.

So, it is beyond time to act on workloads.

And once again, I appeal to the government to work with us to deliver meaningful change, not just a few tweaks here and there, but a fresh approach to what we expect from our schools and colleges, and how we resource them.

And can I make a special plea that the answer which is offered is not AI.

Yes, I am sure that AI can do all sorts of things, but it is not a magic wand which is going to solve all our problems.

We'll continue to have real children in our schools and colleges, who need to be taught by real teachers.

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I have spoken a lot today about what we need from policymakers and other stakeholders in our system.

But let me finish by saying what they can expect from us as leaders.

Throughout the past few months, I have travelled the UK meeting colleagues in all parts of our great nation.

And I have been struck time and again by the positivity, warmth, and dedication I see.

These are people – you are people – who are totally dedicated to your pupils and students, who are practical, solution-focused, and who think deeply about education and pedagogy.

I see a profession which chooses optimism despite all of the challenges that you face – and which I have outlined today.

This is what policymakers can expect from us. A group of professionals who are fully committed to our education system and work tirelessly for our children and young people.

I am very conscious that ASCL Presidents have addressed conferences down the years and that they have made some of the same points that I have made.

It may be tempting to think that nothing ever changes, and we just go round and round the same circles.

But I think that things can and do change.

I'll take this opportunity to remind you of a time when we had a US President who was – how do I put this politely – slightly less 'surreal' and worrying than the current incumbent.

Back in 2012 Barack Obama said:

*“Change is never easy. Change doesn't happen overnight. Change is hard, especially when you're dealing with challenges that have been building up over decades.*

*“But if everyone maintains their determination, their sense of purpose, the bonds that we have with each other, then there's no challenge we can't overcome.”*

That in essence, is what I mean by *Forward Together*.

As I have said, the present government has already done some very good things, and what they say about breaking down the barriers to opportunity for every child is spot on.

It is the driving mission which gets us up in the morning and keeps us coming back for more.

The absolute conviction that every child deserves the best opportunities that we can possibly give them.

We all agree with those sentiments.

Let's now work with policymakers and parents to ensure that these become more than soundbites.

That change for the better really does take place. Let's go *Forward Together*.

I am delighted to have had the chance to speak to you today. It is an absolute pleasure and a moment I will always treasure.

Have a great conference, and thank you for listening.