

General Secretary's address to Annual Conference 2022

Geoff Barton
ASCL General Secretary

ICC, Birmingham

EMBARGO

Not for publication before 00.01hrs Saturday 12 March 2022

www.ascl.org.uk



Under embargo until 0001 on Saturday 12 March

**General Secretary's speech to ASCL Annual Conference
9.30am, Saturday 12 March**

Our conference theme this year is, as you know, ambitious leadership.

I want to talk this morning about what we mean when we use that phrase – and what we don't mean.

So what exactly does ambitious leadership look like?

And as we cautiously emerge from the uncertainties of these past two years, blinking outwards at a changed political and educational landscape, I want to explore where ambitious leadership – partly from government, partly from us – might take our education system next.

But first I think we can all agree – especially in these turbulent times – that ambition is a concept that doesn't always get a good press.

“Vaulting ambition” is how Shakespeare referred to it in his shortest play, ‘Macbeth’ – that raw and relentless study in how the personal drive for obsessive power and status and legacy leads inevitably to self-destruction.

That's why when we talk today of ambitious leadership we're not talking about school and college leaders being ambitious for themselves.

No. The leaders we see most of in education are ambitious for others – for their children and young people, their staff, their institutions, the communities they serve.

And it's what you've exuded, what you've exemplified, as you've led your young people, your staff teams, your parents and communities through the most significant public health crisis in a century.

That's what we mean when we talk about leadership.

But we also know from our ongoing dialogue with you that in the two years since we were last able to meet here in person, you've often felt hemmed in, buffeted by logistics, having to learn a new vocabulary around lateral flow tests, TAGs and CAGs, nasal swabs, and so much more.

You've said that reclaiming a sense of ambitious, strategic leadership has been hugely challenging in times which have mostly seemed anything but strategic.

Well now, we would suggest, there may just be a glimmer of the necessary headspace for us, and for government, to start thinking and planning longer term.

Now is the time for renewed ambition in our leadership.

And what we know is this – that our education system works better for some children and young people than it does for others.

Our *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System*, published in September, crystallised it like this:

Education matters – and it matters particularly to children and young people in disadvantage. But it will take over 500 years to close the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers.

In other words, more of the same is likely to deliver simply more of the same.

We have a good education system. But it's not yet good enough for too many children and young people.

Which is where ambitious rather than compliant leadership is going to be needed, where we will need boldness over timidity. Knowing what to change, what to tweak, what to ditch, what to leave in place – that's going to be the key to our education system's next incarnation.

So how do we do it? How do we take a good but inequitable education system and make it genuinely world class?

Here from ASCL are five modest proposals.

1: Education is not an island

This first one is for the government. It's both compellingly simple but no doubt fiendishly complex. But it's a post-Covid no-brainer which can no longer be ducked.

End child poverty.

What better and more urgent demonstration of ambitious leadership could there possibly be than this?

End child poverty.

Accept that in the sixth biggest economy in the world it really cannot be acceptable that 4.3 million children – that is very nearly one third of children – live in poverty.

Accept that unless there is a cross-government strategy on child poverty, then levelling-up will never be anything more than a dusty bit of half-forgotten rhetoric from a fading manifesto.

After all, the past two years have changed the way we blithely talk of advantage and disadvantage. Now we've actually seen it, and viscerally felt it.

Teachers and teaching assistants in online Zoom and Teams lessons have looked into the homes of children in a way we never could have done before, and they've seen what poverty means in practice.

They've seen young people with aspirations desperately trying to stay connected, to do their work, to concentrate via a pay-as-you-go data network, in houses with no books, no space, none of the trappings we would expect for our own children.

This is an issue for all of government. It isn't just about education. And it is foremost a matter of social justice.

Surely now, it's a moral responsibility to join up the silos of government, to dispense with the jockeying for funding and airtime between departments, to show leadership that is ambitious enough to say simply this:

“We, your government, now bring forward a plan that will eradicate child poverty, and here’s how we will do it.”

This is ambitious leadership.

2: Only connect

Secondly, we welcome the fact that a new schools white paper is currently brewing in the recesses of Sanctuary Buildings.

A white paper gives a chance for a government to recalibrate its educational priorities, to say publicly, here’s where we’ve been and here’s where we’re going next. That is much needed.

But what we know so far is underwhelming.

There’s going to be more detail about a target of 90% of primary children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030.

In truth, we’re worried this falls short of the ambitious leadership we’re calling for. Simply setting higher targets for literacy and numeracy, without a plan, a philosophy, without investment, will achieve little.

Indeed, a fixation on literacy and numeracy – important as they are – could prove counter-productive, narrowing the primary curriculum at the very time when we should celebrate more children taking part in the arts, in sport, in making things, in learning early leadership skills.

And there’s going to be a “clear vision of schools in strong MATs.”

Not everybody is going to agree that a MAT is necessarily the right thing for their school. There are other models of collaboration available after all.

But there is an opportunity for ambitious leadership here. It’s in the recognition that no school or college is an island. Too often it feels at the moment – through admissions, through exams, through performance tables – that for my institution to do well, yours has to do badly.

Instinctively, ASCL believes that a genuinely collaborative system – with a focus on shared responsibility for the communities we serve – must be a better way forward than the idea that schools and colleges are part of a market system with winners and losers.

But it will only work if there is an overhaul of the performance tables which create those competitive pressures.

We support the concept of a new and more meaningful type of accountability– a ‘data dashboard’ – which records not just exam and test results regardless of context but a sense of all those other things that so many schools and trusts do so brilliantly.

How they encourage the wider participation of young people in the arts and sport, how they support teachers and other staff to develop, how they work with other local schools to ensure every child from every background receives the education to which they are entitled.

This is ambitious leadership.

3: Let teachers teach

Third, notice what's implicit in our proposals so far: that schools and colleges cannot be expected to achieve everything that the good parent and the good society should expect for every child.

A joined-up education system would bring with it the specialisms that will support the work of teachers – the mental health specialists, the attendance officers, social care workers, family learning leaders.

But this needs two things:

First, it requires a renewed, more modern view of educational institutions as community hubs for a range of experts other than teachers. We can't expect our teachers, our leaders, to be the experts in all aspects of what a modern society requires.

And all of this needs funding. This isn't – or at least shouldn't be – about the language of cost. It should be about the language of investment – investment in our children and young people.

Second, it requires a fresh look at what being a teacher in the twenty-first century means, how technology could transform the role, how we attract the best graduates to join and then stay in this greatest of professions, reinvented through technology and flexible working.

We've talked about this before.

We think we need more than an early career framework.

We think for teachers, for leaders, engaged as they are in one of the most important roles in society, we need a whole career framework that welcomes the new recruits, supports and develops them, retains and empowers them.

And which takes them on a rewarding journey to expert teacher, expert leader, coach and mentor for the next generation of teachers and leaders.

This shouldn't be difficult. It's time to stop the talking. It's time to do it.

This would be ambitious leadership.

4: Look at what we teach and how we measure success

Our curriculum and our examination system are clogged up. Central prescription of how to train teachers, how to teach subjects, and how we measure young people's understanding – all of these have devalued the essential role of the teacher.

It's time to strip back our national curriculum to its essential core rather than adding further reams of guidance.

It's time to empower schools and colleges to tailor the national curriculum to their local context, working with local employers, voluntary groups, and charities.

And there's a need to recognise that the GCSE – groundbreaking and supremely democratic as it was when it was first introduced – needs a severe and urgent rethink. Some would say dispense with it entirely. We would say: let's be cautious about that.

Given that more than 70% of young people move institutions aged 16, some form of external assessment at that point seems reasonable. But at the moment the sheer amount of external assessment is disproportionate and unsustainable.

There's a need to embrace how technology can – not in the future but in the present – transform the way we assess young people. Other countries see technology as a key opportunity in educational pedagogy and assessment. We should too.

Even more important are the voices of the Forgotten Third – that is the third of young people who leave secondary education without at least a Grade 4 pass in GCSE English and maths.

We believe that no high-aspiring education system would design and then sustain an approach which leaves a third of young people – those who get a 3, a 2 or a 1 in their GCSEs – without the dignity of a meaningful qualification.

What those young people tell us is that, after 12 years of education, rather than leaving with a piece of paper that shows what they can do, instead they have their noses rubbed in what they supposedly can't.

Something needs to change.

We can't allow the voices of the Forgotten Third to remain forgotten, shut out of certain courses, careers and opportunities because of a qualification not fit for purpose.

This isn't just about the dignity of achievement for young people at the end of 12 years of education.

It's about what we – the adults – believe that they, the next generation, need to know by the age of 11, 16 and 18, so that they are genuinely prepared to take their place in a complex world.

And, frankly, if **we** don't reimagine the curriculum on their behalf, who will?

This is ambitious leadership.

5: See education once again as being all about potential

Sometimes it feels as if the government has lost its definition of what education is for.

Those special early years, our rich and joyful primary education, a secondary Key Stage 3 that builds confident knowledge – none of this should be a long and tedious runway leading to distant exams.

We need instead a curriculum for childhood, a sense of what our young people at various ages need to know, need to be able to do, need to have experienced, especially in such uncharted times.

We need them to be genuinely prepared for a world in which they will increasingly interact with people who may not speak like them, may not look like them, may not have the same faith as them, but in which diversity and equality are the non-negotiable and liberating essentials of our age.

We need those young people to understand our past – the stories of who we are and of who we have become, of why our past matters in shaping our future.

And we also need our profession to be one which reflects our modern society, in which achievement isn't limited by your background, your faith, your colour, your gender, your sexuality.

Ours must be a truly representative profession – and that is what ASCL is endeavouring to achieve through our ongoing work on equality, diversity and inclusion.

So, there are my five modest proposals. But, let's add one more ambitious thing to that list.

Because in the past two years, we've seen tumultuous events – first, a global pandemic that has killed millions and upended our normal way of life, and now a war waged against Ukraine by Russia's Vladimir Putin that has wrought a new wave of death and misery.

And one of the lessons we must learn from this is what our young people will need in the future to navigate a world that feels increasingly precarious and troubled.

They'll need the support and security that you so expertly provide in your schools and colleges. A safe harbour in which to learn what is out there.

And they'll need the expert guidance of educators to sift fact from fiction, to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are going to be essential in an endlessly complex world.

Schools, colleges and trusts do their very best to provide those things already of course – but it is not easy in the context of a crowded curriculum, huge workloads, endless targets and political sniping.

So, in many ways everything I have said today leads to this point – liberating the curriculum, allowing teachers to teach, collaboration instead of competition.

Because we must surely move away from the governmental constraints of the past decade – the mechanistic bureaucracy, prescription and meddling.

More of the same is just more of the same.

We need a fresh vision for education and now more than ever is that time.

This is ambitious leadership.

Thank you.