

President's address to Annual Conference 2023

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PRESIDENT'S SPEECH TO ASCL ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023

Welcome to ASCL Annual Conference 2023 where we're hugely proud to present a line-up of fantastic keynote speakers, workshops, and our superb education exhibition.

Thank you also to our brilliant sponsors and to everybody who has made this conference possible.

And most of all, we're proud to have you here – more than 1,000 school and college leaders from across the UK who have made the time to join us here in Birmingham.

This is quite a moment for me.

I left school at 16 with no qualifications – never dreaming that I'd one day be making a speech to anyone at all – much less a national conference of the UK's education leaders.

But I returned to education when I was in my 20s, graduated with a degree in African history, and embarked on a career in teaching.

And today I stand before you as the first black female President of our great Association.

I hope this shows two things.

- The power of education to transform lives.
- And the fact that ours is a profession that is making progress to being more diverse, more representative, of this great modern nation of ours, in all its rich diversity.

We're not fully there yet. We must continue to strive towards this goal.

But as Barack Obama said:

“If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you'll make progress.”

What a year it has been.

The way that you have led your schools and colleges through very challenging circumstances has once again been truly inspirational.

The list of those challenges is extensive.

- Government underfunding.
- The teacher recruitment and retention crisis.
- Industrial action.
- An accountability system that is excessive, punitive, and counter-productive.
- The aftermath of the Covid pandemic on children's learning, mental health and welfare.
- A cost-of-living crisis which has hit children, staff, and communities.

The list goes on.

And you've done all this in the context of chaotic political leadership. This time last year, the Education Secretary was Nadhim Zahawi and the Prime Minister was Boris Johnson.

Remember them?

Since then, there's been no fewer than four education secretaries and two prime ministers.

Even by the standards of the Westminster merry-go-round of the last 10 years it has been surreal.

Over the past 12 months, an education white paper has come and gone, along with a badly drafted bill for mass academisation that was swiftly scrapped.

Meantime, the holes in the roof of the education system remain unfixed.

Chronic underfunding.

Teacher shortages.

Crumbling buildings.

Rock-bottom morale.

And to this depressing list, another factor has to be added.

Today we publish the bleak results of a survey showing the deplorable state of local children's support services.

To be clear. The dedicated professionals working in local authorities and other local agencies are not to blame.

These support services have been eroded over the last decade by government austerity, by increasing demand, or by a mixture of both.

They simply do not have sufficient resources to be able to cope.

And that has had a profound impact on the wellbeing of children.

And it has left us – in our schools and colleges - to pick up the pieces.

We've become a "fourth emergency service".

By default, we've ended up with the unsustainable burden of trying to fill in the gaps from budgets and workforces that are stretched beyond breaking point.

The core business of education is no longer just education.

We're actually providing an unofficial network of welfare support that goes largely unseen by the public.

We step into the breach because we have a moral purpose to look after children.

But we also have to do this for the practical purpose of ensuring they are fit to learn.

The government has to understand that local services and education are interlinked.

Both need to be sufficiently resourced so they can do their respective jobs.

And at the moment neither are adequately resourced – and this is the impact.

Education deserves better than this.

You deserve better than this.

Children deserve better than this.

And that's what ASCL is fighting relentlessly for – a brighter future for young people.

The theme of this conference is 'empowering leadership'.

I thought of that phrase back in the balmy days of last summer as we emerged from the shadow of the pandemic.

It seemed an ideal time to be talking about what we – as leaders – can do for our students.

How we can give them the skills and knowledge to take control of their destinies.

How we can make sure they are not at the mercy of fate.

Or at the mercy of other people's prejudices.

And that sense of empowerment also flows from us having agency as leaders.

The time, space, and freedom to think about the culture and curriculum of our schools and colleges.

The pandemic left us with little time for anything. We had to spin so many plates.

I feel that I should issue a trigger warning before reminding us of those times.

But nevertheless, here's some of the things we had to manage:

- Remote education.
- Partial closures.
- Mass illness.
- Free school meal vouchers.
- On-site Covid tests.
- Teacher-assessed grades.
- Conspiracy theorists protesting about vaccines.
- The endless row about face masks.
- Government threats.

- Gavin Williamson – or, as I should now say, Sir Gavin Williamson.

I told you it was triggering.

It was also all-consuming.

So, viewed from the sunny uplands of last summer, as Covid restrictions faded into the rear-view mirror, it was a good moment to regroup and seize the agenda.

But since then we've weathered seemingly never-ending challenges.

Teacher shortages – and wider staff shortages in general – are now probably the single biggest issue for many of us, even if they weren't before.

Recruitment and retention has been a problem for many years of course.

But it has now risen to the top of the pile.

And it lies at the heart of the industrial dispute which we've also had to manage over this past month.

Covid made matters worse. Many staff took the chance to take stock of their busy lives.

They looked at other professions which have introduced hybrid working between office and home.

And they decided that switching careers would give them a better work/ life balance.

That would have always been a challenging situation for education. It's one of those moments of profound societal change.

But it wouldn't have been such a big problem had it not been for the way in which the government has devalued teaching over the past decade.

- Years of real-terms pay cuts.
- An accountability system which drives people out of teaching and leadership.
- Eye-watering workloads caused by chronic underfunding.

We've warned about all these factors over and over again. And now the chickens have come home to roost.

It is starkly obvious from the government's own statistics that teaching is not attractive enough as a career option.

The government missed its own target for recruiting secondary school trainee teachers by 41% last year.

It only recruited 17% of the target number of physics teachers. You didn't mishear.

That's right. Just seventeen per cent.

And many of the graduates who become teachers then leave far too early in their careers.

Nearly one-third quit within five years.

As a result, virtually every school and college in the country struggles with recruitment.

It really should not need pointing out that teachers and leaders are the lifeblood of the education system.

That without sufficient numbers of teachers we simply cannot function.

And yet that is where we find ourselves.

The industrial dispute which has raged this academic year is not something that has appeared out-of-the-blue.

It is a dispute that has been a decade in the making.

Politicians may grandstand about the damage done by teacher strikes.

But this is the real story. The daily damage being done to education by teacher shortages.

What will it take to persuade politicians that a fresh approach is needed?

A fresh approach that is based on:

- improved investment in education
- improved pay for teachers
- and a more enlightened accountability system

This isn't complicated. But it does take an act of political will. A determination to make education a priority.

No more policy gimmicks and meaningless targets.

Instead, a commitment to improving the educational infrastructure upon which every other ambition is dependent.

Educational standards are not raised by ministers obsessing over the percentage of students who take EBacc subjects.

Or creating some more hubs.

Or tinkering with performance measures.

And you certainly don't raise standards by scrapping lots of very popular BTEC qualifications, as the government plans to do.

Indeed, the danger is that you do the exact opposite.

No. Improving education standards is about considered, coherent, collaborative policymaking, which is backed up with investment that is sufficient and sustainable.

That's the ideal.

But realistically, let's face it, that isn't going to happen overnight.

Even if the political will is there, it is a project which will take time to deliver.

We hope that the present government will at least recognise in the time before the next general election that things must change.

We cannot go on with managerialism masquerading as education policy and an education system that is starved of resources.

And whoever runs the country next – whether that is a Labour government or a Conservative government or a coalition – we desperately need a new commitment to public services.

They cannot continue to be seen as an expense. They are an investment.

The vital component of a well-functioning society.

Education, the NHS, local services – these are the everyday experience of all us at various times in our lives.

They literally determine health, wealth and happiness.

Investment in these services is “levelling up”, failure to do so is “levelling down.”

But this conference – with its theme of empowering leadership – is also about what we can do right now as leaders.

How can we – in these constrained times – carve out some time and space to think about the substance of education?

- A great curriculum.
- Engaged learners.
- High-quality teaching.

My answer: we need to get stropplier.

Here's some examples:

1. Let's view any political whizzbang pronouncement with a healthy dose of scepticism. It probably won't happen and will disappear down a policy drain in due course.

There's no need to jump to the latest tune, because the tune is likely to change.

2. If you get the call and an inspection team turns up on site and it becomes clear that you are not getting a fair hearing – complain, complain and keep complaining.

And if you still don't get a fair hearing, then contact ASCL – that's what we're here for.

3. Tell your governors and parents about the funding and recruitment pressures that you're having to cope with and encourage them to write to their MPs.

There's a reason why you're not able to put a qualified maths specialist in front of a class.

It is the fact that there is a nationwide shortage of these rare creatures caused by years of real-terms pay cuts.

Make sure everybody knows.

4. Do talk loudly and often about all the brilliant things that your school, college or trust does – your culture and curriculum, sporting and artistic achievements, the sense of community and belonging.

We have to fight the drip-drip of negativity about education that infests parts of the media and political establishment.

You are the greatest advocates for education, and you have a powerful voice.

5. Know when to draw a line in the sand. There are many, many calls on your time – from parents, governors, regional directors, various lobby groups on various themes.

You simply cannot meet all those demands – and you don't have to.

A polite 'no' and an explanation about the need to prioritise, is a perfectly reasonable response.

Your time is precious. Protect it.

Okay, getting stroppier isn't going to solve all the problems – or even most of them.

But I sometimes feel that we're too eager to please – for all the right reasons of course – but at our own personal expense.

So, I hope my list of suggestions, if it does anything else at all, gives you a sense of pushing back in times which can feel very constrained.

At some point in the future, our political masters may see sense and look to ease the pressure on the education system.

They may figure out that any system is bound to be more successful when it is properly resourced, and it is not overburdened.

We can but hope.

But, in the meantime, we must wrest back some sort of control.

We need the right systemic conditions and resources to feel empowered.

But empowering leadership also needs to be something that we do for ourselves.

Over the next two days, I hope I have the chance to meet as many of you as possible and to talk further.

This event – more than anything else – is an opportunity for a breathing space and a chance to compare notes with colleagues from different contexts across the UK.

Whatever those contexts, what we all have in common is a shared commitment.

A shared commitment to giving children and young people the best possible life chances.

A shared commitment to the transformative power of education.

As I said at the start of this speech, it is the transformative power of education which has put me on this stage - speaking to you - today.

And it is this transformative power that you provide every day in your schools and colleges.

I am hugely proud to have had this opportunity to address you, and hugely proud to represent you.

Thank you and enjoy ASCL Conference 2023.