

President's address to Annual Conference 2022

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President's speech to ASCL Annual Conference 10.30am, Friday 11 March, 2022

Good morning colleagues. I'm incredibly proud to be able to welcome you to our conference this morning from all parts of the UK and from all types of schools and colleges.

It is often said that ASCL is a broad church. From where I stand, looking out at so many great leaders in so many different contexts, that feels like our greatest strength.

I guess you will have a mixture of emotions right now after the last two torrid years.

But I think it's safe to say that the overriding one is that we are all just delighted to be able to return to Birmingham and actually be in the same room as one another.

Although from my memories of conference it was always a lot more relaxing being sat out there than it is being stood up here.

In preparing my speech, I wanted to ensure that I was able to speak to you from the heart.

And to do this – as any headteacher should – I thought about my core values to make sure they run as a golden thread through what I have to say today.

These core values are very simple.

They have been with me since I entered the profession and they were uppermost in my mind recently when colleagues from ASCL and I met with Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi to discuss the contents of his forthcoming white paper.

Put simply, my philosophy on leadership is to keep coming back to a simple question:

“Would this be good enough for my own children? Would I want for them whatever change we are planning on implementing in our school? How would I want them treated?”

I hope you will see this ethos reflected in my speech today.

I thought that I might look at my speech this morning in two sections.

In the second half, I am going to look forward to the future and, most significantly, at how we can seize the moment.

I'm going to look at how we can reflect the theme of this conference – ambitious leadership – on behalf of our students.

But first this morning, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect back on the last two years and to take a moment to **acknowledge and applaud** all that you have achieved in what have been the most challenging of circumstances.

When thinking of a quote to open my speech many sprang to mind, but I kept returning to 'If' by Rudyard Kipling and its opening lines:

*If you can keep your head when all about you
are losing theirs and blaming it on you;*

*if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
but make allowance for their doubting too;
(If, Rudyard Kipling)*

It has certainly been a period when we have sometimes had to deal with criticism and doubt from some sections of the media and politics.

But as we gather here today, this is a moment to acknowledge how well school, college and trust leaders up and down the country kept cool heads during the crisis.

You provided principled leadership not just in your schools and colleges but in your wider communities too.

In truth, it has felt like our profession has taken a bit of bashing for some time now – long before the advent of the pandemic.

But I wonder if the experience of the pandemic has changed some minds and given people a greater appreciation of what we do.

The Greek statesman, Pericles, said:

What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.

I think it's fair to say we've been incredibly busy weaving.

The pandemic has shone a light on:

Our **agility in adapting our curriculum** and teaching styles to move to a remote, virtual learning environment overnight.

The **emergency on-site provision** we arranged for the children of frontline health workers so they were able to focus on their vital role of saving lives.

Keeping open our institutions for the most vulnerable children at a time when the nation was in lockdown – and visiting their homes to check they were safe.

Setting up Covid testing stations – leading on the tracking and tracing of close contacts.

Supporting the vaccination programme for young people – despite the stream of legal threats from anti-vaxxers that we all received.

The **diligence and dedication** to ensure that young people were able to receive robust assessments after exams were cancelled – giving them the certainty they needed to move on to the next stage of their learning with confidence and pride.

And, of course, setting up an entire logistical system to provide **vital supplies** and get food to families who needed it most when the government didn't see this as a priority.

Until a Premiership footballer shamed them into action.

And all of this was delivered with little or no resource – other than the goodwill of the teaching profession.

Throughout these two years, school and college leaders have stepped up time and time again.

And I think people have seen that our schools and colleges are far more important than the performance metrics by which the government judges us.

Parents at home with their children have experienced at first hand the challenges of teaching a demanding curriculum.

Politicians have realised how vital the role is that we play in our communities.

And the public has acknowledged that young people need their schools and colleges for much more than the lessons they learn in the classrooms.

I came across this quote from an American writer, Suzy Kassem, which resonated:

Choose a leader who will invest in building bridges, not walls. Books, not weapons. Morality, not corruption. Intellectualism and wisdom, not ignorance. Stability, not fear and terror. Peace, not chaos. Love, not hate. Convergence, not segregation. Tolerance, not discrimination. (Suzy Kassem, Rise Up and Salute the Sun: The Writings of Suzy Kassem)

Over these past two years, I think this is what you have done – built bridges, not walls.

At a time when the media were looking for a catastrophe, you provided calm.

At a time of **high anxiety**, you provided **answers**.

And whilst **some partied** you **performed miracles** (I think we deserve a round of applause).

And so we turn to the second half of what I wanted to share this morning.

We now seem to be turning a corner in the pandemic.

We're going to learn to live with Covid. And we can look forward to a summer where we and our staff can at last begin to get our heads above the choppy waters of the past two years.

Young people are able to return to some semblance of a normal school day without masks, social distancing, bubbles and all the isolation and anxieties that come with these.

And so the talk turns to the future and the forthcoming white paper on schools.

I am proud that ASCL has been playing a major role in helping shape and influence the main strands that will form the meat of this major policy document.

It is clear that the Department for Education has a number of key areas it wants to focus on.

But I thought I might use this moment to identify those areas that we as ambitious leaders – who actually work in schools and colleges – might want to prioritise.

I'll begin with **professional development**.

We've seen the green shoots of success in the extra support for teachers in their first crucial years through the introduction of the **early careers framework**.

But we need to go beyond that with a strategy and resources for **continuous career development**.

This should be a commitment – by the profession and the government – to ensure all colleagues have **guaranteed time and access to engage** in high-quality professional development.

It would have a massive impact on improving teacher recruitment and retention.

It would help us to keep our very best teachers in the profession and support them to be constantly refreshing and improving their pedagogy.

It would ensure our students enjoyed the very best lessons.

We know all this. We are probably all striving to achieve something like it.

But we also know that the current level of government **investment** in schools and colleges does not allow us to do so.

On over-stretched budgets, we simply don't have the resources to create the time needed.

I ask our government to **share our ambition** and work together with us on a new vision for our profession.

Secondly, we need to address the way in which we **assess** young people.

The last two years have surely shown us that sitting 300 young people in a stuffy sports hall is not the most effective way, nor the safest in our uncertain world, to see what they know.

Now is the time to utilise the great power offered by technology to make our assessment system **more accurate, more robust, and less burdensome** on both students and teachers.

Technology could enable us to assess young people in some knowledge and skills by their stage of learning rather than by their age.

The technology is out there. It allows assessment to be adapted around the learner, recognising what they can do rather than penalising them for what they don't know.

There's nothing new in that idea. None other than a young Winston Churchill observed:

I should have liked to be asked to say what I knew. They always tried to ask what I did not know. When I would have willingly displayed my knowledge, they sought to expose my ignorance. This sort of treatment had only one result: I did not do well in examinations.
(Winston Churchill)

Assessment simply must move away from being about a **collection of badges**.

It should instead be seen more as a **system of bridges**.

Bridges that enable young people to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding so they can move confidently on to the next stage of their learning.

Thirdly, we need an urgent review of our **admissions procedures**.

At the moment we effectively have **selection by postcode** in many areas. Middle class children gravitate to certain schools because their parents can afford to buy houses in those catchment areas.

Conversely, schools in deprived areas have much higher numbers of disadvantaged children who are often the pupils who most need extra help and support.

Wherever they are located, schools do their level best for their pupils.

But there **must be a more equitable and less divisive way of doing business** – one which gives more priority to disadvantaged children in admissions processes in all schools.

Fourthly, and closely connected to this, is **the long overdue and much-needed reform of support for children with special educational needs.**

The current system works on a deficit model – **expensive and complicated** provision after the crisis has already occurred.

Provision for SEND must be **built in and not peripheral** and we have to move to a system which **prioritises proactive early intervention** with targeted high-quality provision.

This is how we will provide the support a child needs at an early stage, when there is the best chance of dealing with the challenges they face before they become worse.

It is not only more humane but also makes far better financial sense.

And, finally, there needs to be a fresh approach to our **overbearing accountability system.**

For too long we've seen how performance tables can end careers and drive practices which are not in the best interests of young people.

This has to stop.

Instead, we should **measure what we treasure.**

We should **scrap performance tables in their current form** and introduce instead an accountability dashboard – or 'balanced scorecard' – which gives a rounded view of a school or college and enables parents to see the things that most matter to their children – what we teach and how we support them.

And in the immediate future the government **MUST** rethink its plan to publish Key Stage 4 and post-16 performance tables based on this summer's exams.

How can it be right to compare the performance of one school or college with another when they have been so differently affected by the pandemic over the last two years?

The government's answer is to say that it will place a health warning on performance tables and advise caution when considering the data.

Surely, if the data is unreliable, the obvious answer is not to publish it in the first place.

This is not a small matter. Careers and reputations are affected by performance tables. Newspapers publish them.

It feels as though we are being **thrown to the wolves** by the government's insistence on going ahead with this misguided and counterproductive policy. That is a pretty terrible way to treat a profession which surely deserves more respect after the last two years.

But I want to finish on a positive note. Beyond Covid, beyond the white paper, there is how we shape ourselves as a profession fit for the future.

And this more than anything is about our own sense of **ambitious leadership**.

It is the ambition to be a profession which embraces diversity, which champions equality, which shows by example the sort of society we want **all** our young people to grow up in.

A society which is kind, respectful and fair, which rejects division, and values every person equally.

We all know that there is much more work to do to make our profession truly representative and diverse.

But I am proud that ASCL has taken such positive steps in this direction over the past couple of years with the establishment of ethnic diversity, LGBT+ and women leaders' networks.

And I want to thank all those involved for their work in establishing these groups.

These are small steps, but they are important ones.

They come not from the government but from the profession itself and this is how it should be if we are to demonstrate real leadership.

We must be at the forefront of **driving forward these values** because they go to the **heart of social justice**, of giving everyone a fair chance in life.

As former US President Barack Obama said:

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.
(Barack Obama)

It is an absolute pleasure and privilege to welcome you to ASCL Annual Conference 2022.

Enjoy this opportunity to meet with old friends and make new ones.

I encourage you to visit our fantastic workshops, our education exhibition, and listen to a glittering line-up of keynote speakers over these two days.

But most of all, take this moment to reflect on what you have done, and what you are doing.

As Martin Luther King famously said:

The ultimate measure of a person is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

I have been proud to be able to stand next to you.

You are a credit to this great profession of ours. Thank you.