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R E G E N E R A T I O N

General Secretary's address to Annual Conference 2021

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Good morning, and thank you for joining us at the start of another week of who-knows-quite-what.

In the old days – by which I mean of course this time last year – I'd have been standing at a podium, on that wide spot-lit stage, in that cavernous auditorium in Birmingham, addressing a thousand or more people.

Whereas today, here in this unnerving, unfathomable hinterland of cyberspace, we may have 2,500 viewers, or – frankly – it may just be you and me.

So let's assume it's the latter.

And therefore rather than deliver a speech for a different audience in a different era, could you and I agree that today we'll make it a conversation – one I hope that helps you to reflect on what you've been through over the past year.

But which also helps you to help us – an association and trade union of more than 21,000 leaders of schools and colleges, across the UK, in all kinds of contexts – to hold a mirror up to where we are now and then to point a telescope at where we might head next.

Let this not be a speech, but part of an ongoing dialogue with the people who have shown themselves so resilient, so adaptable, so able to rise above anxiety and pettiness – you, the leaders who have done such extraordinary work to maintain educational continuity in unprecedented times for our children and young people.

And at the risk of a conversational spoiler, do note this: you are far, far more influential than you realise. More of that later.

And so to our conversation.

What you're already hearing from ASCL's annual conference this year is the sense that we are at a moment, emerging from national crisis, blinking collectively into the sunlight like that annual ritual of watching the Blue Peter tortoise lifted from its box of hibernation.

And what you're seeing is an appetite for regeneration.

Most significantly – in this moment of moments – you're witnessing the nation's school and college leaders, across all types of institutions, in various roles, saying, in effect, we have more ambition for our children and young people, for our teachers and communities, than the government has.

This is indeed quite a moment.

So let's explore what that might mean.

And let's start by illuminating where we are by reflecting on where we've come from.

Back in September 1939, when World War II was declared, the BBC's fledgling television service was running a Mickey Mouse cartoon for children. With that announcement, the cartoon was stopped in mid-flow for the sombre confirmation that Britain was once again at war.

But the odd thing is this.

When the war was over in 1945, the BBC returned to that cartoon. But rather than starting it at the beginning, they resumed it at the point at which the interruption happened – exactly the frame at which the cartoon had stopped.



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You'll spot the subtext: we're not going back to the way things were. Instead, your future begins here. There was to be no treading of water, of lamenting a receding past.

That was a generation who, emerging from national crisis, craved looking to the future rather than dwelling on its backstory.

That's why our president, Richard Sheriff, was so clear in his speech on Friday about the need to avoid the language of 'the Covid generation', 'the lost generation', and any underlying implication that our children and young people today should somehow be defined in their future by a past that was not of their making.

We cannot see them as educational victims in all of this.

That's why we reject the reductive, deficiency-riddled terminology of 'catch-up'. It's why we welcome Sir Kevan Collins' immediate recognition that the extracurricular magic of the arts and sport will play their crucial part in recovery. It's why we also believe that Ofsted's commitment to a rich curriculum offer may be especially important in the months ahead, rather than pupils being endlessly targeted for extra maths or extra English.

So if we look back to the lessons of the Second World War, we see a population emerging from crisis who craved change, sought optimism, yearned for a better future.

Those wartime evacuees, sent away from cities sometimes three times during the course of the war, sometimes to distant counties, sometimes to distant countries, speak in a language which is anything but that of victimhood:

Dan: "My subsequent life and career was, I believe, profoundly influenced for the better by my experiences as an evacuee."

Beryl: "Evacuation gave me a different view of life."

Ronald: "I look back on my period of evacuation as one of great significance to me. It broadened my character immensely."

Our conference in 2021 aims to learn from those experiences of some 70 years ago.

Because it wasn't just about the children and young people. It was also about the political leaders of the day.

As that future secretary of state for education, Rab Butler, said to his father: "Dad, I must do something which is going to help the world of today and not that of yesterday." As the war raged, Butler was developing a consensus about what education should look like for a world when war was ended – a new settlement between the state and its people.

Thus was formulated the raising of the school leaving age; a new commitment to the sustained training of teachers; a redefinition of elementary education; an acknowledgement of the importance of technical education; a national wish to broaden the entitlement to higher education irrespective of a young person's background; an acknowledgement through free milk and free school lunches that schools play an integral role in the future health of a nation emerging from crisis.

If ever there was an ambition to view education as the driver of an improved future for the nation's citizens – in attainment, opportunity, health and dignity – it was the reforming zeal of a small, bold cadre of politicians.

Theirs, truly, was the spirit of regeneration.



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Which brings us to now, and to our conference.

Covid has held up a mirror to our education system, to our communities, to the national quality of our leadership. It has shown its strengths and weaknesses. As the Secretary of State for Education acknowledged at our conference on Friday, education has rarely been off the national agenda.

And beyond the woeful U-turns and missteps, the shameful headlines about hungry children and the ravages of poverty, we've also seen our schools and colleges providing hope, educational continuity, vestiges of community cohesion and – in spades – relentlessly optimistic leadership.

Yes, you are more significant than you realise.

So where do we go from here?

This summer, ASCL will publish its Blueprint for a Fairer Education System. Based on evidence and expert testimony, our starting-point will be that we have a good education system, one that works well for many, many young people.

We'll celebrate its many strengths – the commitment to a broad and balanced education, the recognition that what happens in the classroom is enriched by the quality of what goes on around it – the conversations between children and trusted adults, the arts, the sport, the debating, the residential visits. We'll celebrate the often undervalued skillsets of our teachers, teaching assistants and other staff. We'll highlight the vital community role so many schools and colleges play in often fragile communities. We shan't shy away from spotlighting the good.

But we also know from former times that our education system is built upon a system of comparable outcomes which at GCSE leaves more than 30% of students or so without the dignity of achievement in the basics of English and maths.

And that – even before the pandemic began – modelling by the Education Policy Institute suggested the rate of progress in closing the attainment gap at GCSE between disadvantaged pupils and their peers was so slow that it would take over 500 years for it to be eliminated.

We won't let the voices of the children who are left behind continue to be forgotten.

We'll forensically identify where we need to go from here.

Because at the moment, for too many children and their families, their educational trajectory feels like some arcane board game played by other people who know the rules better than they do, something beyond their immediate control.

We'll therefore help a government with its new and unfamiliar constituencies to see what those constituencies may need for their children and young people to build real faith that education is their stepping-stone into a better future.

All of this will take changes to funding methodologies, accountability, dismantling our national snobbery around so-called academic, vocational and technical qualifications, being bolder, less ideological, and – please – less spooked by potential tabloid headlines.

Let's get back to principles, to what we believe in.



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Our Blueprint for a Fairer Education System this summer will do more than ask the same questions posed so often. We'll provide solutions too. And our solutions will come from people who, day by day, are in the nation's schools and colleges, on the corridors, in the classrooms, speaking from grounded, authentic experience.

They are the people doing, not just saying.

In the spirit of regeneration, here's a flavour on those leaders' behalf of what we'll be suggesting.

First, that there are no quick fixes. Surely by now we've learnt that. So can we ditch the gimmicky, now, please? Meaningful and sustainable change takes time and commitment, just as developing great teachers and great leaders does. It requires people who want to stick around, who are part of a mission to the communities who need them most. We'll show how we can make that a reality.

Secondly, world-class education doesn't come from smoke-and-mirror funding promises and labyrinthine access to ring-fenced pots. Great education – which isn't just what happens in the classroom – costs. It's an investment. Funding for our schools and colleges must be sufficient to ensure all children and young people receive the education they deserve, whilst also being targeted towards pupils, schools and colleges with the biggest challenges.

Thirdly, could we now move beyond the ideology, the politicking, the knowledge-rich mantras, and instead acknowledge that a relatively small number of changes could take our education from the misty-eyed rhetoric of world class to actually being so.

That means:

- A curriculum that has broad political consensus and rejects the snobbery of academic, vocational, and technical compartments; a curriculum which is subject to considered review once in each parliamentary cycle; a curriculum which recognises the distinctive importance of the arts and sport in the development of our future citizens.
- An accountability system that judges our schools and colleges on what they do through collaboration rather than in competition.
- An assessment system at 16 which uses a range of measures, including robust, quality-assured teacher assessment rather than a reliance on an industrial level of exams.
- A fundamental acknowledgement that what matters most is the quality of our teachers and leaders, and that there are practical ways that we can recruit, retain and harness the talents of this workforce, reinventing teaching as the number one career of the 21st century – a time when the ability to learn and re-learn will be an essential passport to your future. In the coming age of the robots, great teachers are going to matter more than ever. Great leaders already know this.

So stand by for our Blueprint report, with its practical response to five essential questions:

- 1 What and how should children and young people be taught?
- 2 How should teachers and leaders be identified, developed and supported?
- 3 How should the education system be structured?
- 4 How should the education system be funded?
- 5 How should we judge if the system is doing what we want it to?



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And going back to my echo of Churchill's mantra that headteachers have more power than the British prime minister, I look you in this webcam eye and say this: "You have more power than you realise".

As we emerge from this national crisis, our speeches this year are no longer echoing around an echo chamber of conference delegates.

Children, young people, parents and the media have been engaged with education like never before. They've seen its extraordinary strengths, all that has been achieved, plus its worrying inconsistencies.

And we've seen too that governments are pretty woeful when it comes to making things happen – planning for the inevitable cancellation of exams, feeding hungry children, moving to rapid online learning.

This pandemic has shown that – unlike after WW2 – we no longer look to our politicians to solve national problems.

Ultimately, the people who have fed those children, who have reassured students about exams, who have moved rapidly to online ways of working, who have maintained a sense of calm authoritative leadership – that's been you.

You have more significance than you know.

And if, in the coming months you agree that it's time to reform our qualifications system, to rethink GCSE and its obsession with external exams, to reject the narrow metrics of accountability at key stage 2 and key stage 4, to invest more in early years education, and to do what's right rather than what's mandated, then you might just find that this is our moment.

And today, as one tiny step in that process, in taking the clunky rhetoric of system leadership and converting it into action, we are proud to announce our plan for a festival of school arts in the summer term – a day when schools and colleges, supported by organisations across the arts, fill social media with the voices of children, singing, reading poetry, performing, showing their artwork.

The message will be: children and young people won't be victims in all of this. And nor will the nation's school and college leaders. Watch out for how your institution can be part of the festival of school arts.

But fundamentally watch out for something deeper, richer, bolder, more ambitious – how we, emerging from a national crisis, say we won't default to the world as it was. We're not going back to the start of that Mickey Mouse cartoon.

Here, today, we're showing more ambition than the government. We won't default to an education system that left too many left behind. Frankly, we can do better than this.

Even if ministers can't or won't, school and college leaders will embrace a spirit of much-needed, high standards, world-class educational regeneration.

And, yes, if necessary, we'll do it ourselves.



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