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

President's address to Annual Conference 2021

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EMBARGO

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This time last year, we were gathered at the Birmingham International Conference Centre for ASCL annual conference.

What a long time ago, and a different world, that now seems.

None of us knew then that it would be the last we would see of 'normal times' for the next 12 months.

Since then the pandemic has taken a terrible toll – not least in the world of education which last saw disruption on this scale during the Second World War.

Many of you will be feeling battered and weary after a long year dealing with all this and what it has meant for your schools and colleges.

Coping with the complexity of risk assessments, testing regimes and remote learning has been the everyday reality, and of course there has been 'The Guidance'.

This year's virtual conference coincides, of course, with the full reopening of schools and colleges in England – while in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland more children are also being welcomed back into classrooms.

Spring is also on the horizon – a time of renewal and growth.

Last Sunday – the day before English schools fully returned – our four hens laid their first eggs since the start of winter, finally paying us back for their food and accommodation over the past six months.

The next day, I stood outside one of our secondary schools and watched as enthusiastic, smiling leaders welcomed back excited children, and I could feel the energy and optimism returning to the building.

Renewal, growth, regeneration. This is the theme of our conference.

This is apposite because there is a crucial choice to be made as education, and wider society, reopens after lockdown.

Do we now default back to the old, familiar way of doing things, or do we reflect on what we have learned over the past 12 months and seize this moment to do things differently?

I am sure we are all familiar with the TV show Doctor Who and its ingenious plot device of periodically regenerating the Doctor. It allows for new actors to take on the famous mantle, and it also serves as a way of recharging the show.

Now is the time for the education system to regenerate – keeping hold of what is good but with a fresh determination to take the next step forward and finally lay to rest some of those long-standing problems that seem so obdurate, so difficult to solve.

Because the fact remains that while our education system does very well for many children, it does not do so well for some children, and in particular, those from disadvantaged homes and communities.

And I say 'education system' there quite deliberately. Because I know that up and down the country there are dedicated teams of leaders and teachers who work tirelessly and with great commitment to improve the outcomes for these children.

But they are not helped by an accountability system which too often stigmatises the very schools that most need to be supported.



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They are not helped by a GCSE system which – in normal times – leaves one third of children without a coveted standard pass in English and maths.

And they are not helped by funding pressures and teacher shortages which leave them without the essential resources needed for improvement.

The pandemic has thrown a particularly harsh light on the gap between rich and poor. Many children spent much of the crisis without a dedicated laptop or internet connection, unable to access the wealth of online resources available to middle class children. We wait with trepidation to see how this plays out in the attainment gap.

But the experience of the pandemic has also given us some pointers of the way ahead.

In conversations with colleagues over the past 12 months I have heard again and again about 'Covid keepers', the things changed for Covid that will now become part of the everyday school experience.

Often these are organisational – split lunches, year group social areas etc – and very often technological, including new approaches to remote pedagogy, feedback and assessment.

So, let's consider other things to think of afresh.

The fragility of our qualification system and its reliance on endless pen-and-paper exams in exam halls has been brutally exposed by the pandemic.

Is an approach to assessment which is not dissimilar to that of the 1950s really the best we can do for students in the 2020s? Isn't it time to rethink assessment, make more use of technology, and provide children with wider opportunities to show what they can do?

It is not just a matter of future-proofing the exam system in case – heaven forbid – there is another pandemic. It is more because the reliance on taking terminal exams on an industrial scale seems so excessive and outdated.

The pandemic has also changed views in a subtler way – beyond the nuts and bolts of pedagogy, exams, and technology.

It has made us all feel more vulnerable as individuals, as institutions and as a society – a feeling exacerbated by our sense of isolation as we have locked ourselves away.

I wonder whether this will change our priorities, make us more focused on friends and family, and less focused on status and wealth?

I speak to more and more young people now who want to do something with their lives which has real social value. This is perhaps one of the reasons why we have seen a big increase in teacher recruitment this year.

Beyond the impact of Covid there are other transformative movements which are reshaping our world – and these are often championed and led by young people.

Their passion for an environmentally sustainable world, their determination to fight against racial injustice – problems which have festered for far too long – is palpable and energising.

How does all of this fit into our thinking about education? Does our current curriculum give sufficient weight to contemporary concerns, does it provide our young people with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate a rapidly changing society, does it reflect the diversity of modern Britain and an increasingly globalised world?



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As educators we know that the curriculum is full to bursting, and that if you put something in, you have to take something out. We also know that there is much that is great about the curriculum, that it represents an educational inheritance for the next generation.

But it is also true that the curriculum is not a fixed body of knowledge, immutable for all time, but something which must change and flex in tune with a changing world.

It feels increasingly that there is a job to be done – and that we as the custodians of the curriculum are the people who are best placed to lead on that work. This too is part of regeneration and renewal.

And then there is us as leaders and teachers.

I know it's been tough on parents having to help with their children's learning at home. But it has been great to hear so many of them talk about how that experience has given them a greater understanding and appreciation of what teachers do, and of what a valuable role schools play in holding communities together.

We have also learned more about the capacity in our teams to demonstrate agile, effective and inspirational leadership.

This has been supported by the fantastic efforts of teachers in all phases – from early years through to colleges. Together, you and your teachers have done everything asked of you and much, much more.

- Provide remote education to millions of children at short notice. Done.
- Set up provision for vulnerable and key worker children. Done.
- Put in place a host of safety measures to enable full reopening. Done.
- Operate a contact tracing system for positive cases. Done.
- Set up mass Covid testing stations in your schools and colleges. Done.

The list goes on and on. It has been a Herculean effort. You and your staff have been on the front line during this pandemic, doing everything possible to minimise the disruption to children, doing everything possible to support and reassure them.

I want to thank you, our leaders, and your brilliant staff, for your work, your dedication, your commitment.

So, despite the inevitable sense of weariness that many of us must feel, there is also cause for great optimism. This is a noble profession, with a proud tradition, and we can push on from here to look for opportunities to take the next step forward.

I have touched on some of the things that we need to consider – qualifications, accountability, and the curriculum – but we need to put flesh on those bones and develop a solid vision for the future.

And this is what ASCL has been doing prior to and throughout the pandemic – piecing together just such a vision. We are calling it our Blueprint for a Fairer Education System, and, as the name suggests, its central aim is to improve social justice.

We intend to publish our Blueprint in the summer setting out a series of clear proposals which allow us to build back stronger and better.



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It will be rooted in our experience as leaders, based upon the evidence of what works, and relentlessly focused on delivering the very best outcomes for all our children and young people.

Until then, here are some thoughts.

What do parents and children care more about? The intricacies of Progress 8 scores or having a rounded curriculum that provides not just a diet of academic learning, but also values sport and the arts?

If it is the latter – which I firmly believe to be the case – we surely cannot persist with an accountability system that drives sport and the arts to the fringes of the curriculum.

Shouldn't accountability be put back in its box as something which operates as a check rather than something which operates as a centralised diktat?

Covid has surely taught us that life is not a series of metrics, or data spreadsheets, but something which needs to be fulfilling, happy and cherished.

I am not talking about no accountability. I am talking about proportionate accountability.

And what of the accidental technological revolution that has taken place over the past 12 months? As we regenerate, there is a unique opportunity to harness and build on the knowledge and experience we have gained.

Technology can give us the means to further tailor children's learning, provide them with individualised assessment, and deliver to them a whole world of online resources. It can support and liberate teachers to focus on what they do best – teach.

Finally, I have probably made my own piece of history this year by being ASCL's first and probably only 'virtual president'.

It's been unusual, but it has also been an absolute honour to represent this fantastic profession as it has risen to the challenge of the pandemic.

I am in awe at many of the stories I hear of how you have been delivering online and in school, serving the needs of the most disadvantaged, looking after your staff and supporting each other.

We are so fortunate to have a cadre of leaders who are dedicated, imaginative and driven to work in an ethical way to support all our children.

And I dedicate my final words to the children and young people who have lost out on so much during this last year – the missed milestones and missed friends – as well as all those who have suffered anxiety amidst the chaos over exams.

I hope that the tag of the 'Covid generation' will quickly disappear into oblivion because they deserve better than to be labelled by the pandemic.

They have endured, and they are very nearly through to the other side. I hope they will feel more resilient as a result of this experience and not weighed down by its legacy. I prefer to call them The Remarkables.

There will sunnier days to come. Let's fight for a brighter future. It's time to regenerate.

Richard Sheriff
ASCL President 2020-21



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