

Meeting the Challenge - President's Speech 2011

When I started to think about this speech, and jotted down some notes, it looked as though the letter "P" might dominate proceedings; you know...Pisa, Pensions, Post-16, Performance Management. But then the list got a bit longer, and longer again, and no matter how inventive I got, the other letters of the alphabet refused to go away. And as I reached the bottom of my first page, and started on the second it made me pause and reflect just how much we have been asked to deal with in the past year. It wasn't simply the case of meeting one challenge, they were legion, and we might well be in need of a miracle to deal with them all.

The next question then, was why now? What had we done, or not done, to deserve such a flurry of activity and demands on our time? Surely we have had a stable administration since devolution, with one party largely calling the educational shots; or had I missed something obvious? No, I don't think so; but my analysis is that, rather as we have been accused of getting a little bit complacent, so our political masters may have become a little bit too accustomed to governing, and convinced themselves that all was well, and other matters required their attention.

Then came PISA, and a recognition that, no matter how things were dressed up, standards in Wales had fallen behind those in the rest of the UK. Now, clearly, the blame must lie with school leaders, because it couldn't possibly be anything to do with politicians; after all, they only set the educational agenda. But, no matter who is to blame, and we will gain little by going any distance down that road, the penny has dropped, and we now have a significant amount of work to do to meet the additional demands. On a visit to another school the other day, a Governor told me, it's not so much a case of the goal posts having moved, it's more that we are playing on a completely different pitch!

Now, it would be easy, and relatively pointless just to sit back and moan about the pressures that it places on school leaders. The reality is that we have to roll up our sleeves and get on with it, as we always have done. It is enormously frustrating to be portrayed as people who have allowed things to slip, and have to put up with insinuations that we don't care, because the truth is I have never come across a Headteacher who doesn't care deeply about their own school, and the success of their students. But we are where we are.

It is now clear that the focus has shifted from 5 A*-Cs to the Level 2 Threshold including English/Welsh and Maths. It is also clear that we need to be much more aware of the achievements of the various groups of students within our schools. The level of data analysis now needed, requires us to drill down deeper than we have ever done before, tracking achievements of students from individual feeder schools, FSM students, boys, girls, even down to the individual classes of similar standards, not just within our own schools, but also within the family. This sort of detail is fascinating, and something that we may previously have thought of as worth exploring, but never quite got round to. Actually, I think it's probably a very good thing, and will give us much food for thought, and help map out the action we need to take. This in turn should lead us to be much more precise about our target setting, and accurate about our predictions. What concerns me though, is the impact all this, combined with the new Performance Management regulations, in which the school's targets become the Head's personal targets, may have on the prospects of recruiting new Headteachers.

Do we really want to go down the road of being viewed like a football manager; expendable if the results don't appear quickly enough? We often talk about intelligent accountability, about taking responsibility for what happens in our schools, and I accept that the Head sets the tone and articulates the vision, but it isn't a one-man (or woman) show; it's about teamwork. You only have to look across the border to England to see what happens when "super-Heads" are brought in to turn round failing schools; most of them show quick gains, and then fall back. School improvement is not a quick journey, it takes time and persistence, not a few sound-bites and flashy short cuts.

Right now, our agenda is more than full, and many of the things we are being asked to do are in themselves very worthy, and some of them long-overdue. But we still have to operate in a context of budgetary uncertainty, (what will 85% delegation actually look like?), the pressures of possibly having to deal with staffing reductions, and the probability of significant changes to our pension arrangements.

As the leaders of our schools, we have to set the tone, to remain positive in public even when we may be feeling far from positive inside. I have taken many calls from colleague Headteachers who are feeling totally demoralised by being told that, despite all their efforts over many years to raise standards, that their school is in Band 4 or Band 5. With the

imminent publication of banding, and despite the glossy leaflets that I'm afraid do nothing to quell our fears, many schools are resigning themselves to the inevitable negative publicity that will follow, and in some cases the barrage of blame to is likely come from the media, local authorities, and in some cases their own Governors. For years we have been advised not to label children, and of the dangers of self-fulfilling prophecies, and yet is this not exactly what our government are doing to us?

There has to be a better way that allows schools to retain their self-esteem, yet encourages us to strive for even better. It is too easy to point the finger of blame at schools, and ignore the social pressures that affect so many of our children. The simple fact is that where children do not have the support from the home, it is proportionately so much harder for schools to do their job. There is a massive piece of work to be done raising the aspirations of local communities and seeking to help improve parenting skills. Education is a complex process that relies on a number of factors for success including local communities, social pressures, the economic situation, parents and schools; we, of course play a major, but not solitary part in this, and this needs to be recognised and addressed as a national priority.

With all this going on, we might easily sink into a slough of despair, but I don't think it's all bad news! There have been some positive signs that should encourage us. For years we have been saying that the existence of 22 local authorities is a nonsense in a country of this size, and at last something is being done about it. Now, we may have some doubts about how it will turn out, and as always a time of change is potentially uncomfortable, but we may well end up with a system that is significantly better than the current one, particularly if we contribute positively to the process. The discussions about the shape of exams is not all bad news either; we calculated recently that because of the modular approach to A level, we lose between six and seven weeks of teaching in a school year. Now, whilst I accept that the modular approach can benefit some students, I also wonder if those same students might not do better overall if they regained the 150+ hours of teaching that they currently lose during the year.

We live in challenging times, and because of the nature of our profession we will rise to those challenges, we will maintain a positive outlook, and we will find ways to turn the challenges to our students' benefit. The next year will be tough for us all, but I am confident that we will come through it, resolute in our determination to improve the life chances of all

our young people. You may be certain that ASCL will keep up the dialogue, keep putting our case, and remain the positive force it always has been, to influence the decision-makers in every way we can. I look forward to spending another year as your president, and thank you for the confidence you have shown in me, and I look forward to reporting to you at this time next year how we have together met, and dealt with, the challenges we face.

In the meantime, if we have one message for the politicians and officers at both local and national level, it is this: school leaders are not the problem; together with our colleagues we most definitely represent the solution! Certainly, you will not find a more committed and professional group of people. We can achieve what you want, but we need you to trust us to rise to the challenges, and work with us to ensure that every young person in Wales succeeds.

Thank you.