

Social mobility and child poverty review

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A Introduction

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 15,000 members of the leadership teams of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. This places the association in a unique position to consider these issues from the viewpoint of the leaders of both secondary schools and colleges.
- 2 The promotion of social mobility is at the core of the work of school and college leaders, whose raison d'être includes improving life chances by raising aspirations and enabling all of their students to overcome barriers arising from the circumstances of their birth. For this reason ASCL warmly welcomes the inclusion of improving social mobility as a principal goal of the present government's social policy.
- 3 ASCL has participated in discussions and policy development about this for many years and therefore welcomes the attention being paid to these important issues and the intention of the government to address them. The interest and expertise of this association leads us to consider how the education service in particular works for social mobility and can do so more effectively, and how government education policies help or hinder in this.
- 4 Education is a way out of deprivation, but this is not as well understood in the UK, specifically in England, as it is in other parts of the world.
- 5 Education of young people, and the educational level and parenting skills of their parents, are critical to determining their life chances. There are of course other areas of policy that need to be addressed, but education cannot be overlooked; policy changes in education can have far reaching effects in improving or reducing social mobility. And whilst the education (especially of deprived children) is in need of extra resource there are a number of policy changes in education that would be very efficient in improving social mobility at no or even negative cost.
- 6 ASCL is committed to assist with a move to a more open society with greater social mobility; an idea that, if not always understood in quite the same way, commands very general support. Social mobility is clearly of value to individual citizens, who are enabled to live lives and do work that are more rewarding both socially and materially. It is also of value to society in unlocking the talent and hard work of those who would otherwise be out of work, less productive or in some cases destructive.
- 7 It is important for government to accept that improving social mobility is a long-term goal, and that there has been progress in recent generations and even recent years.
- 8 However, that progress has been fragile and inconsistent, and sometimes ground has been lost as well as gained. ASCL has serious concerns that some education policies

of the current and recent governments have the unintended consequence of working against social mobility.

- 9 This paper therefore reiterates the association's current position on and commitment to this important topic, reflects the key role school and college leaders have to play in making improvements, and sets out recommendations pertinent to education which would assist them in doing so.

B Definitions and focus

- 10 Social mobility is not always understood in the same way. No doubt the review has or will consider carefully what is meant by it, and the emphasis that should be given to different aspects and stages.
- 11 There is a tendency in some quarters to focus on access to Russell Group universities as a key indicator of social mobility. This is not unimportant, and the association does support the desire to see more students from disadvantaged backgrounds admitted to these prestigious institutions. But this is only one (rather small) aspect of the issue. Social mobility should include life chances; improving the opportunity for all to take whatever route in life that suits their desires and talents. To that end it is important to value and reward all those who work to support themselves and society, not just those who have a particular set of talents and take a particular route.
- 12 Therefore we should also be interested for example in enabling those who wish move from unemployment or low-skilled work to skilled trades to do so. We should be interested in improving parenting skills, to the benefit of the next generation. And since happiness and good health as well as economic success are strongly correlated with education level, we should be interested in improving the general education of all.
- 13 There needs to be consideration in much greater detail of the cultural implications of the following kinds of routes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds completing their compulsory education:
- remaining in full-time education in a college or school
 - progressing to undergraduate study at any university
 - undertaking employment based training such as an apprenticeship leading to qualification in a particular trade
 - entering employment from backgrounds of intergenerational unemployment and dependence on the welfare state.

All of the above may well require a young person to break a tradition, which has existed across generations, of completing compulsory education without achieving any qualifications of any kind. Keys to such a giant step include transforming self-esteem, confidence and resilience and developing aspirations, which may well require a young person to challenge entrenched attitudes and pressure from peers and families which conflict with this approach.

- 14 Further, there are several stages to social mobility:
- First, an individual must realise the value of living or working at a higher level; that it is better to work than not to do so, that other work can be more satisfying as well as better paid, that new forms of social activity requiring more effort can be more rewarding.
 - Second, an individual must aspire to make such a move. There can often be a false sense that such a change is not possible because of a lack of confidence.

This is especially true in disadvantaged families and communities without many successful role models, who often feel that 'this is not for the likes of us'.

- Third, barriers not related to the talent, skills and knowledge of the individual need to be removed, for example prejudice based on social class, ethnicity or other irrelevant characteristic. This last step is the most obvious, and it is on this that policy often concentrates. It is important, but it is less pernicious than, and depends upon, the first two steps.

15 These changes of attitudes and culture lie at the heart of the work of schools and colleges. There is extensive evidence that those institutions that have been most successful in this respect work tirelessly to advise, guide and counsel their students as well as provide them with access to excellent teaching. There are many ways in which this is achieved and no single approach is a panacea. School and college leaders have found the following particularly effective:

- One-to-one tuition in English and literacy compensating for low levels of literacy or the needs of learners for whom English is an additional language. (These are very different needs which are often treated as the same by commentators.)
- Deployment of learning assistants to give additional support and attention to individuals within mainstream classes providing them with enhanced access to the curriculum.
- Mentoring programmes that provide role models.
- Learning coaches and personal tutors.
- Outreach workers in colleges who identify with young people who would otherwise not be in education, employment or training (NEET) and help to keep them engaged.
- Parent support workers in schools who help with communication to and from parents who find schools daunting, and can draw them into parenting classes.
- Providing out of hours facilities which give students a place to study and access to ICT.
- Schemes such as parenting programmes and support groups which help parents to support their children in their education.
- Programmes of personal, social and careers education associated with a coherent programme of face-to-face advice and guidance provided by qualified careers professionals.
- Access to a broad range of opportunities including extracurricular activities, educational visits and opportunities to undertake community service.
- Providing students from impoverished background with the IT equipment, tools, transport and other expensive items that they need to progress and that their more fortunate colleagues' families can afford. This often requires access to funds to support students from poorer backgrounds who could not otherwise afford to participate.

C Curriculum

16 Although paragraph 2.19 of the recent white paper *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility* emphasises the importance of teaching all life skills throughout education there is little evidence that this is a priority in the Department for Education (DfE), where public statements are almost exclusively focused on subjects described as 'academic'. The message perhaps inadvertently being given is that personal, social, cultural, spiritual, and even work-related learning are of lesser importance. This is being reinforced for example by the narrow emphasis of the national curriculum review on a limited set of academic subjects.

17 Recent announcements from the DfE imply that GCSE is the only valid qualification at age 16, vocational qualifications being automatically inferior. ASCL has never

disagreed with the need for the 'equivalences' of some qualifications to be changed but the fact is that many schools have improved greatly by introducing a broad curriculum which motivates students who have been disengaged from education by allowing them access to courses with practical emphasis. Their reengagement in learning has then improved standards of literacy and numeracy.

- 18 There has been persistent criticism of certain subjects which are not valued by ministers. This has led to an alarming decline in take up of a number of subjects that are outside the 'English Baccalaureate'.
- 19 Likewise A level, though only designed for or taken by a minority, is given absolute primacy amongst 16-18 qualifications and the work of many students, and of whole colleges, is by implication disregarded or devalued.
- 20 **ASCL recommends that the government reviews the messages it is sending out about the relative importance of these aspects of the curriculum.**

D Accountability and reward

- 21 There has been a longstanding tendency in British education to laud those individuals and those institutions who achieve the highest levels in a certain limited range of activities. See the remarks in the curriculum section above.
- 22 To some extent this is inevitable, but it appears to be much more marked, based on a much narrower range of values, and much more pernicious, than in comparable countries such as Germany or the US.
- 23 The effect has been damaging in penalising those institutions and individuals who take on the more challenging task of helping people out of social, educational and economic deprivation, whilst rewarding those that have the less difficult job of educating those with every kind of pre-existing and current advantage and support.
- 24 The performance indicators (PIs) used to assess the performance of schools and colleges are not well chosen, and their publication in 'league tables' compounds the fault. For example, a PI based on the proportion of 16 year olds who achieve at least five grades at GCSE at level C or better (including maths and English) not only has many perverse incentives but also takes no account of the mix of students present in a school. It is made worse by the use of arbitrary thresholds for this measure, a practice of both the present and previous government, which lead certain schools to complacency and others to despair.
- 25 The abandonment of the contextualised value-added measure, which did take these factors into account, was a serious error. That it is a complex measure was the stated reason, which is true, but what these PIs purport to reflect just is complex. The use of measures such as that described in the previous paragraph is highly misleading, and not simple but simplistic.
- 26 Similar mistakes have been made in evaluation within the college sector, and between schools and colleges; systematically under-valuing the work of those who serve inner-cities, deprived council estates, pockets of rural poverty, and students with disadvantages, deprivations or problems of all kinds who come from any area.
- 27 There is now consideration of a destinations performance indicator. This is in itself a not unreasonable idea, as some schools and colleges are better at advising their students and at raising their aspirations. It would be good for others to learn from them. However, if this is framed in terms of numbers of students going on to Russell Group universities or Oxbridge it will not have any good effect. The schools and colleges that

come at the top of such a league table are already well known, and their success is due to being full of very able, highly motivated, well-supported students from aspirational and well-to-do families. They have little to teach those institutions without such an advantage, who would simply be told (yet again) that they are failing their students when in fact at least some of them are performing very well indeed in this respect.

- 28 In recent years the inspection regime in England has been too closely aligned to the failed numerical measures mentioned above, far too often simply reflecting the figures that have been supplied to inspectors before an inspection. This leads to further denigration of some very effective institutions, whose good work is grudgingly deemed satisfactory because their examination results or success rates are below average.
- 29 The ability of schools and colleges in an area to improve social mobility relies on there being an education service which meets the needs of all young people. This includes students with disabilities, special educational needs, learning difficulties, mental health problems, chaotic home backgrounds, drug or alcohol dependency, and every other deprivation and disadvantage. ASCL has consistently warned governments that accountability systems do not provide incentives to cater for such students. It is absolutely crucial that this is reversed.
- 30 **ASCL recommends that government addresses the need for an accountability system that recognises those schools and colleges that cater for the most vulnerable.**
- 31 Funding regimes likewise have tended to reward those with the easier task, to the detriment of those with the harder. A plethora of specific grants to address specific types of deprivation have been a feature, and have been used to good effect, but they have not been well coordinated or necessarily available to those who need them most. There has been no consistency of funding between schools and colleges for example.
- 32 In the schools sector the pupil premium is now intended to replace such grants, and to enable the provision of services needed by disadvantaged students. ASCL strongly supports the principle of providing such funding and targeting it towards those young people who need it most. The freedom to decide at the local level how to spend it is welcomed as a way of achieving this, but the announcement in September 2011 of 'top slicing' £50m from the pupil premium for the summer school initiative calls this commitment into question. This seriously undermines efforts by schools to adopt the best practice in strategic financial planning.
- 33 **ASCL recommends that the government clarifies its position about its intention to allow schools to make their own decisions about how to spend the pupil premium.**
- 34 The reality to date is that this funding has only partially replaced the previous and now discontinued funding streams, meaning that choices have had to be made about which interventions to continue or develop. ASCL recognises that this funding is due to increase in forthcoming years, but it is essential that this is a genuine increase. If, as current evidence suggests, it simply replaces funds that are cut back elsewhere it will not have the desired or necessary effect. It is possible and to be hoped that the Education Endowment Fund will play a part in compensating for this but this very limited funding is not sufficient to have an impact in all areas. It will only impact on those successful in bidding against a timescale which was unmanageable for many.

- 35 Pupil premium funding is not available post 16. But this post-16 funding has been particularly hard-hit by recent cutbacks. This has profound consequences for the quality and range of the curriculum that can be provided by schools, colleges and training providers. The element of the funding formula that has been most reduced is precisely the one that was used to provide much of the extra learning support needed by those students struggling to overcome deprived backgrounds and move towards better work and better lives.
- 36 Proposals to remove funding to colleges for ESOL work with students on many categories of benefit, requiring them to try to raise fees from impoverished prospective students, has severely reduced the uptake of these courses, which are so crucial to the opportunity to find well-paid work. Though partially reversed, the proposals have had the effect of deterring many from attending such courses, often leaving them in economic inactivity and poverty.
- 37 **ASCL recommends that the government maps and monitors the impact of these initiatives across every area of the country and every type of institution, and takes urgent compensatory action where funding is not reaching those who need it.**
- 38 ASCL is also concerned about the long-term impact of the reduction in total funding due to short-term economic pressures. Social mobility depends on the equitable funding of all schools and colleges, and ASCL therefore strongly supports the implementation of a national funding formula. However, the size of the overall funding pot is also of fundamental importance.

E Structure

- 39 Education systems and structures are less important for social mobility than the factors mentioned above, but it is the structure of the education system that has apparently been the main point of interest in recent months and years.
- 40 A theme of this paper has been the kind of message that is being sent out by government and reinforced in the media about our education service, and specifically that part of it which seriously addresses the need for social mobility. This does not reflect the reality that it has been improving rapidly and continues to do so. The strong impression given to young people is that their education system is 'failing', which undermines the confidence, aspiration and self esteem especially of those who most need to pass through the various stages of social mobility mentioned in paragraph 14 above. The damaging impact of this cannot be underestimated. This approach is incomprehensible to observers overseas who recognise, admire and frequently emulate different aspects of the many strengths of our education service. It is often justified by an accusation of complacency amongst the education profession. Yet it is almost impossible to find a school or college leader who does not recognise the potential for further improvements or aspire towards them. The ability of our education service to improve social mobility relies entirely on its capacity to instil confidence in our young people. School and college leaders can only achieve this with the full and overt support of those who set and influence policy.
- 41 Every year there are criticisms of examination achievements at the time results are published, which damages the self-esteem of students who have worked hard to achieve them and makes them question the purpose of their efforts.
- 42 As mentioned above there is a narrow definition of success built into all our accountability and funding systems which focuses on certain examination results to the exclusion of other aspects of education. No school or college leader would deny the

importance of qualifications and their power to accelerate social mobility. However they are only a part of educational success.

- 43 Although structural changes in themselves do not automatically lead to improved standards of achievement the intention of increasing autonomy is welcome. There have been many examples of how institutional autonomy has given schools and colleges the power to implement change rapidly and effectively. ASCL members work in all kinds of institutions in the maintained and independent sector and seek to learn from each other's experiences, successes and failures. ASCL therefore does not take a view about any particular structure such as academies but evaluates the effectiveness of any initiative in the context of its impact on standards and social mobility.
- 44 ASCL is strongly committed to the responsibility of all school and college leaders to providing for all young people in their area and has therefore warmly embraced moves away from competition between institutions towards a culture of collaboration. Our publication *Achieving more together* summarised extensive research on the effectiveness of a collaborative approach and the principles which needs to underpin it.
- 45 ASCL is therefore very concerned about policies leading to the development of new schools in areas where there is no need for more places. There is a significant policy tension between the wish to provide all young people with access to an excellent school and the creation of surplus places at a time of austerity. The creation of some schools automatically sends others into a spiral of decline as they compete for pupils. Such decline does not happen quickly but impacts on the quality of education provided, meaning that young people suffer during years of decline. Needless to say, those who suffer most are precisely those who most need a strong education to help them to overcome disadvantages and to strive for upward social mobility.
- 46 It is important, if we are to avoid a further loss of social mobility, that every type of school and college should be evaluated fairly and resourced to provide for its students. Without that there will be a continued move to social segregation of schools and colleges, which is very damaging for social mobility. There is a danger that when certain types of institution are championed by and associated with particular ministers that they will be promoted to the detriment of others. For example free schools, university technical colleges and studio schools should be properly accountable and not allowed to become socially, ethnically or religiously divisive.
- 47 In the colleges sector there are fewer such initiatives, but even more severe funding reductions mean that there is an imperative to compete more strongly. This leads to similar sets of undesirable consequences as in the schools sector. It is also true that many general further education (FE) colleges and some sixth form colleges have been particularly strong engines of social mobility, yet it is their funding that has been cut back most, leading in some cases to their continued existence being in doubt.

F Transition Years

- 48 A number of current policies relating to transitions appear to be in direct conflict with the promotion of social mobility. The incentives to stay in education after 16, as outlined above an important driver of social mobility, have been reduced. Specifically the following are examples of policies likely to reduce social mobility:
 - 49 That the raising of the participation age remains a priority is helpful and welcomed. But the removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and its partial replacement with a new lower value scheme works strongly against this. EMA has been a powerful incentive for young people from low income

families to continue with their education. It also had a very beneficial effect on attendance, retention and hence success rates.

50 ASCL made strong representations about the abolition of EMA and welcomed the introduction of a partial replacement for it. But there are still many concerns about the current arrangements, not least that administration of the scheme and decision-making about the allocation of its funds have been devolved to schools and colleges. This is likely to lead to students being confused about their options, to inconsistencies, and to further divisions. If such funding is not accessible on a consistent basis then, in the context of the well-known variations in the level of funding between areas, this will lead to some institutions having greater capacity than others to provide such support. It could also lead to the use of such awards as a marketing tool and to young people from poorer families having to make decisions driven by financial rather than educational needs. This is not a fair or equitable approach.

51 **ASCL recommends that the government closely monitors the impact of this policy including comparisons of the availability and level of grants available to young people in schools and colleges in different parts of the country.**

52 The discontinuation of a number of initiatives such as *Aim Higher* designed to raise aspiration and encourage access to higher education for members of families which do not have a tradition of higher study will clearly work against social mobility. School and college leaders report that these initiatives have been highly effective. Although some very laudable attempts have been made to replace them, there is no guarantee of provision across the country. There is therefore a likelihood of unfairness and inequalities.

53 **ASCL recommends that the government redoubles its efforts to ensure that outreach programmes of this kind are available in every area of the country.**

54 Cutbacks in Connexions services and the removal of face-to-face careers guidance are very unhelpful. Again this will affect those from educationally and financial impoverished families disproportionately. There is an absence of any coherent service providing young people with access to qualified and quality controlled professional advisers. ASCL has been collaborating with other stakeholders including the Careers Profession Alliance and the Employer Education Task Force to mitigate the effects of this. However,

55 **ASCL recommends the establishment of a careers advice service which is planned and coordinated at national level.**

56 Although apprenticeship programmes are due to be expanded communication about the opportunities available to young people remains very poor and seems unlikely to improve given the problems with the careers service. This contrasts sharply with policies in other European countries and is potentially very damaging to our economy. Young people need clear information about the routes available to them and to be given support and advice in accessing them. Employers and politicians need to send out a very strong message of support for these routes. The contrasting and often conflicting messages from DfE and BIS are unhelpful in this context, with the DfE tending to present vocational education very clearly as a second-class option.

57 **ASCL recommends that the government engages in discussion with school and college leaders about ways of improving communication to young people about apprenticeships.**

58 The introduction of higher university fees has not been helpful. It is welcome that for some of the neediest categories of student the new scheme will be less expensive, but this is not well understood. ASCL welcomes the efforts of the Independent Task Force on Student Finance.

59 But the fact remains that levels of student debt are set to rise and low-income families are usually, for good reason, more debt averse than middle-class families. There is clearly a danger that this policy will reduce rather than increase the number of young people who enter university from disadvantaged backgrounds.

60 **ASCL recommends that the government monitors university admission trends and the routes taken by young people who do not go to university in order to gauge the impact of the change in fees. In doing so it should ensure that there is a focus on evaluating the quality and appropriateness of the routes chosen in the context of prior educational attainment.**

G Internships

61 ASCL agrees that internships can provide valuable opportunities for young people to gain skills and experience. However they are much less accessible to young people from poorer backgrounds, whose families do not have the resources to pay for them. Internships should be viewed by employers as an opportunity to develop and invest in the future workforce, and they should allocate them by systems as fair and transparent as those used to select new employees. A public commitment to the provision of such opportunities from employers' representatives would be extremely helpful. At present it seems that many internships are only accessible to those who can afford a significant investment and those whose families have the right existing contacts. This needs to change.

62 **ASCL recommends that all internships are paid at or above the minimum wage and allocated to those with the greatest merit.**

63 Access to the professions will only be made fair when these routes are seen as genuinely open to people from all backgrounds. Young people in all schools and colleges need access to role models from the professions. Initiatives such as the Education and Employer Task force 'Speakers for Schools' programme (which despite its name applies also to colleges) can contribute to this and the government's support for this programme has been welcomed by school and college leaders. People working in professions who have come from maintained schools and deprived backgrounds need to invest time in schools and colleges particularly in the most deprived areas in order to tell their story to young people and raise aspirations.

H Summary

64 ASCL believes that the challenge of increasing social mobility can only be resolved by a collaborative approach which crosses departmental, professional and party political divides. School and college leaders agree that their institutions should be 'engines of social mobility'; they should be engaged in an open and evidence-based debate aimed at developing strategies, which they have a crucially important part to play in implementing and evaluating.

65 **ASCL recommends that the government recognises the key role school and college leaders have to play and engages with them at an early opportunity to draw upon their extensive experience and knowledge.**

66 There has been relatively little opportunity to discuss the complex, highly charged and very significant issues raised by this important review. The timing of the call for evidence was such that it coincided with that part of the year when school and college leaders are least available. However, ASCL hopes that this is of value to your consultation and is always willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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