



**Leading the Way:
Blueprint for a Self-Improving System in Wales**

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“Then Taliesin sang: In water
there is a quality endowed
with a blessing”

“Leaders of education at
every level working together
in a self-improving system
providing mutual support and
challenge to raise standards in
all schools.”

Huw Lewis, October 2014



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Foreword: Our journey towards a great education system

The blueprint is a vision written from the point of view of an imagined future – it is a narrative that looks back from this vantage point on the steps that we might have taken on our journey towards this future. Thus, it is both a chronicle and a plan. As a chronicle, we should assume some parts are misremembered – or at least set out more simply than the reality might be. As a plan, it is likely to be imperfect, making hard problems look too simple. It attempts to join some dots on the horizon that are perhaps converging and to mobilise the system to confront problems that have not yet been successfully addressed.

We want an education system in Wales in which all children and young people achieve. We believe that we can have a great education system that delivers quality and equality for all students. This will involve an act of imagination, courage and collective action. Our blueprint sets out a vision for the Welsh education system. At its heart is capacity building – leadership capacity, pedagogical capacity and the capacity for creativity and action.

We know that too often leadership is an afterthought of education reform.¹ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that real reform requires sustained attention from many people at all levels of the education system. It is not enough for a government to be fully committed – a sense of synergy and common purpose depends on the capacity and active co-operation of leaders across the system.²

We recognise that there are some significant and unique challenges for Wales. Wales has a large proportion of low-performing students and a smaller proportion of high-performing students. On top of this, we have a diverse student population – not all of whose needs are being met.³ The OECD has recommended that the Welsh Government develops a long-term vision for education, develops a shared vision of the learner, builds professional capital, and *treats system leadership as a prime driver of education reform*.⁴

We believe that system leadership is more than just institutional leadership – it is leadership of the education system itself. Educational leadership includes, but is not defined by, locality leadership or leadership of groups of schools. We believe that the next phase of the improvement journey in Wales must be defined by system leadership.

Our blueprint is based on evidence – it confronts the shortcomings in the performance of the Welsh education system. It builds on national and international evidence, including the OECD and the McKinsey reports. *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*⁵ tells us the journey to good involves a relentless focus on shaping the profession. This journey also involves consolidating and rationalising the system foundations, the production of high-quality performance data, a strong and secure system of school accountability, and appropriate funding, organisational structures, and pedagogical models. Our blueprint addresses each of these. But the starting point should always be teaching and learning⁶ – this is why our blueprint starts here.

We are ambitious – we believe that our system is on a journey to great. The McKinsey report states that the journey to great marks the point at which the school system comes to largely rely upon the values and behaviours of its educators to propel continuing improvement. The focus shifts from central direction (or 'mandating adequacy') to 'unleashing greatness' in schools themselves – working collaboratively to improve the quality both of teachers entering the profession and existing teachers, cultivating peer learning within schools and between them, encouraging innovation to discover future leading practices, and ultimately ownership of outcomes and the quality of education by the profession.

There is an important difference between a self-improving system and a school-led system. It is, of course, possible that a school-led system is not an improving one. It is also possible that a school-led system is self-serving rather than self-improving. A self-improving system is by definition strongly school-led, with the Welsh Government legitimately responsible for determining the standards and regulatory frameworks for accountability purposes. A self-improving system has secure controls that act as a guard against self-interest.

As we take this significant step towards clarifying and giving definition to a self-improving system, it is important that we give careful consideration to the constraints that work against it. The middle tier is a problem that has been highlighted in various reports.⁷ We make some specific proposals for how this can be addressed, building on the work of the consortia. Our proposals will not be easy to implement, but they are possible in the wider policy context of local government reform, if the Welsh Government is prepared to grasp the nettle and act with courage and honesty.

1 Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009, cited in Schleicher, A. 2014, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, OECD

2 Schleicher, A. 2014, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, OECD, p. 79

3 Schleicher, A. 2014, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, OECD.

4 Ibid, page 8-9 and Hargreaves, D. *A Self-Improving School System: towards Maturity* <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/15804/1/a-self-improving-school-system-towards-maturity.pdf>

5 Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. and Chikioke, C. 2010, *How the World's Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better*, London, McKinsey & Company.

6 Schleicher, A. 2014, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, OECD, p. 121.

7 Notably Hill, 2013 and Schleicher, 2014.



Education will always be a political priority because of the amount of public money expended on it and because it is the key investment in the nation's future prosperity and wellbeing. The OECD is clear that addressing the quality and equity of a country's education system can help to shape its future.⁸

We understand that education should have a political dimension. We also see a more strategic role for the Welsh Government. The role of government is to remove obstacles and create the conditions for a self-improving system. This will need to involve a commitment from politicians to re-calibrate their relationship with the profession to allow the next stage in a self-improving system to emerge. The Welsh Government will need to commit to move away from a centralist, top-down approach that can only ever encourage a compliance mindset that works against unleashing greatness in the system.

Indeed, we believe that the Welsh Government is ready to do so. This is why we acknowledge the ambitious statement of Huw Lewis, Minister for Education and Skills, in the preface of our blueprint.

Our blueprint represents a strong appetite among the profession of school and college leaders to step up to the challenges, confront the facts and work with brave and forward-thinking government to solve the problems and unleash a great education system

We recognise that there has been significant change in the system and that the blueprint anticipates further change at a time when the education sector in Wales is change-fatigued. The key difference between previous reform programmes criticised by the OECD and the changes that we are outlining is the shift away from government towards the profession itself leading the change.

This blueprint deliberately speaks to schools and school leaders – primary, secondary and special. However, its principles and vision are relevant to the whole Welsh education sector from early years through to post-16 and further education. The relatively large number of actions for school leaders reflects a shift of agency and power that we believe is a necessary condition for a self-improving system to emerge.

It is now time for the profession of school leaders to step forward and grasp this leadership challenge. The next phase in system leadership is to define what a world-class, self-improving system looks like, and then move steadily and determinedly towards it. This is why the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) has published a blueprint for a self-improving system in Wales – our journey towards unleashing greatness in Welsh education.



Eithne Hughes ASCL Cymru President



Ravi Pawar ASCL Cymru Vice President



Maria Rimmer ASCL Cymru Immediate Past President

8 Schleicher, A. 2014, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, OECD, p. 5.



Principles that underpin our blueprint

We believe that the following principles are fundamental to unleashing greatness in our education system:

- **Quality and equality:** A good education for all is a central principle of our blueprint. We believe that achievement can be realised at scale for all children and young people. We reject determinism either by social background or by perceived intelligence.
- **Accountability:** The highest form of accountability is the individual's professional accountability for the quality of his or her own work and to the people whom the profession serves. In a self-improving system, we believe that teachers and school leaders must be agents of their own accountability. The role of the state is to determine the accountability measures in the interests of parents and the wider community, incentivising policies and behaviours that contribute to a high-quality education for all. The role of governing bodies in holding schools and their leaders to account is central to a self-improving system.
- **Subsidiarity:** We believe that decision making should be devolved to the most immediate level consistent with its implementation and to the place closest to students, such as to schools. In a system in which subsidiarity is the norm, there must be strong and intelligent accountability. Thus, subsidiarity and accountability are twin principles.
- **Evidence:** We believe that there is a need for a strong system for analysing evidence so that it can be informed by professional expertise to improve the quality of practice and outcomes for students. Both policy and practice should be evidence-informed.
- **Innovation, creativity and ambition:** Our education system must prepare young people for life in a global, digitised community whilst continuing to equip them with core skills and an understanding of the best that has been thought and said. So, education must both improve and innovate to stay relevant. It must both do things better and do things differently. A whole generation of children and young people are growing up using mobile devices and social media in an information age – and their expectations will grow quickly. Pedagogical development and digital literacy are therefore both inevitable and necessary, and will rightly build on the solid foundations that most schools have in place.
- **Collaboration and partnership:** There is a strong correlation between collaborative cultures and system success. We believe in continuous improvement through principled strategic partnerships. As government steps back, schools will need to operate in such partnerships if they are to build capacity and address system-wide challenges such as succession planning. School systems improve when the quality of teaching improves. Partnerships offer the best way to ensure the spread of professional expertise and evidence between schools. We believe that it is necessary to consciously build professional capital and trust among teachers and create the conditions for teachers to work together to improve practice within and across schools.
- **Common good:** We believe that education is for the common good. A good education creates the social conditions which allow young people, both as individuals and in groups and communities, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily. We accept that sometimes the imperative for the common good must override subsidiarity – government has a role to play in ensuring that the system serves all equally well.

A view from the future – a vision set in 2020...

The education system in Wales is on a secure journey to great.

The Welsh Government decided that the only way for the system to make the jump to the next level was to draw on the expertise of good and outstanding school leaders. A shared policy narrative emerged which placed school leaders and school-to-school support at the centre of educational reform. Wales began to look beyond the UK to learn from the best international practice.

The regional consortia in Wales have blossomed into a full-blown, coherent and sustainable self-improving system with strong and clearly defined school-led features, which include a growing emphasis on school-to-school collaboration and a recognition that expertise lies within schools.

In 2015, the middle tier between the Welsh Government and schools was still not efficient in bringing about the necessary transformation in standards.⁹ School leaders worked with the government to remove duplication and ensure robust leadership and governance. There is now a synergised, leaner and logical system of support to schools with clarity about employer functions and executive powers of intervention. The consortia designate Professional Learning Alliances – federations of schools working together to deliver core system functions.¹⁰

Rationalising the middle tier released efficiencies and a drive to subsidiarity. School funding is now sufficient, equitable and sustainable. A lean middle tier in the form of the consortia focuses appropriately on schools where standards are not yet sufficiently secure. Swift intervention takes place where there is institutional failure. School improvement is now driven through school-to-school support. Improvement and advisory functions outside of schools are now rare – the exception rather than the rule.

School leaders, sensing an emergent model back in 2015, stepped forward to lead the transformation agenda, pursuing the goal of a high-quality broad, balanced and relevant education for all young people. Building from the principles in the Donaldson report, schools began to determine their own curriculum within a broad national framework, which has now brought creativity, dynamism and relevance into curriculum development.

At the core of the education system is a strong belief in embracing Welsh culture and language. Wales is a bilingual country and this is central to education policy. The profession quickly got to grips with the quality issues in the teaching of Welsh identified back in 2013. There is now wide acceptance of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and school leaders have worked together to address the quality of Welsh language teaching. This has not been achieved by central prescription from the Welsh Government but rather through various profession-led initiatives. These have included joint work between Welsh-medium, bilingual and English-medium schools; links with outside agencies that have supported teaching, learning and the provision of resources in Welsh and modern foreign languages; and the use of technologies.

Evidence-based models of what makes great teaching began to emerge through the new Professional Learning Alliances, in which the groups of schools work together to provide high-quality professional education to new and experienced school staff. It is now commonplace for schools to have powerful professional learning cultures, with teachers routinely working with each other using methodologies like lesson study.¹¹ This has been driven forward by the Professional Learning Alliances.

School leaders took on a shared responsibility for the quality of education of all young people in their area, not just those in their own school. A shared language of system leadership began to emerge.

Those schools with strong and sustainable outcomes have earned autonomy. Through the consortia, these schools are now engaged in school-to-school support. Roles such as executive heads are emerging as schools federate in strong and sustainable groupings.

The Welsh Government created the legislative framework to consolidate all responsibilities for oversight of the system in the consortia. Government took on an enabling role, using its powers to stimulate school-led raising of standards and high-quality education. The system has been mobilised by a small number of ambitious goals focusing on lead rather than lag measures which have fired the collective imagination and released professional energy.

9 We are aware that there is a current consultation on options for local government reform. The current structure is failing to deliver quality services across Wales, with education services still in special measures in several authorities. KPMG estimates that the current system is costing council taxpayers £151 million on duplicated administrative services per year.

10 The Welsh Government has launched a programme of pioneer schools to design and develop the curriculum framework and lay the foundations for change by ensuring that all practitioners have access to effective professional learning, supporting them to realise the new curriculum. Our proposal for Professional Learning Alliances embraces this but goes beyond an individual school. Research has shown that professional learning is most powerful when it is shared across schools through collaboration and peer learning.

11 Lesson Study is a teaching improvement process that has origins in Japanese elementary education, where it is a widespread professional development practice. It can be translated as 'research lesson' – a method where teachers plan, teach, observe, and critique each other's lessons.



The responsibilities of Welsh Government are clearly delineated

They include:

- Fair funding that is sufficient, sustainable and equitable, which includes per learner funding, weighting for disadvantage as well as other vulnerable learners, and enables educational organisations to focus on closing achievement gaps.
- A slim, smart and stable framework of standards in outcomes and public accountability.
- Calculation through agreed modelling of numbers of teachers needed in each region and the promotion of the status and value of teaching as a profession.
- A capital programme that ensures sufficiency and quality of educational provision and learning environments that are fit for the 21st century.
- A strategic role in monitoring the performance of the system and in identifying and helping to address potential strategic issues that could hamper future success.

School leaders and the Welsh Government worked together to create the blueprint for the new system using six elements...



Element One: Building professional capital

Our vision

Teaching is seen as a highly skilled profession that is constantly being refined, challenged and developed to improve outcomes for students. Teachers have a sound understanding of the 'why' and 'how' of teaching as well as the 'what'.¹² Teachers see themselves as contributing collectively to excellence in a world-class education system, the creation of a fair society and the common good. This renewed focus on the moral imperative of teaching and the purpose of education has brought a strong sense of energy, collective purpose and professionalism.

The Furlong report back in 2015 mobilised a new professionalism among educators in Wales. The profession stepped forward to take the lead. A progressive set of profession-owned teacher standards are now in place. These standards conceptualise teacher learning in a developmental way. They emphasise 'knowing and understanding' with clear recognition of the use and creation of evidence.¹³

As a consequence of the Furlong report, the Welsh Government launched a programme of Professional Learning Alliances,¹⁴ in which groups of schools work together to provide high-quality professional education to new and experienced school staff. They are now firmly part of the Welsh Government's plan to give schools a central role in raising standards by developing a self-improving and sustainable school-led system.

Professional Learning Alliances are usually led by an outstanding school. They are typically a group of schools working together in a soft federation with other schools and strategic partners like higher education institutions. They have a core set of functions which include:

- initial teacher education¹⁵
- continuous professional learning
- leadership development
- supporting weaker schools in the system through school-to-school support
- research and development – again in partnership with a higher education institution

These five core functions have provided a powerful incentive and purpose for deep partnership between and among schools. They have also raised the status of the profession, ensured quality professional learning at all career stages and streamlined and resourced school-to-school collaboration.¹⁶

Most Professional Learning Alliances have a director of professional learning who co-ordinates, plans, challenges and supports professional education across the schools in the alliance. The best of these is designated as centres for pedagogical excellence.¹⁷

Teachers now routinely have high expectations and a commitment to the achievement of all learners, take responsibility for innovation, relish change and help to lead it. They have a sharper focus on the needs of individual learners, including helping them to learn how to learn. They accept and respond to demands for their accountability and take personal collective responsibility for professional learning.¹⁸ The responsibility for professional learning is entirely the remit of teachers, schools and groups of schools working in collaboration with each other through Professional Learning Alliances.

12 Donaldson 2015 page 58

13 The streamlining of professional standards is also a recommendation in the OECD report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*.

14 Furlong proposes 'Training Schools' - schools given additional staffing to undertake their work on teacher education. We would prefer 'Professional Learning Alliances' with a wider, but centrally defined set of core functions.

15 We support Furlong's proposal for schools to have a leading role in initial teacher education, in a whole-school approach to professional education, working in close collaboration with their university partners. He envisages programmes developed in systematic ways, integrating what student teachers learn in school with other forms of professional knowledge that they acquire through their universities.

16 Professional Learning Alliances are a policy solution to building professional capital and a culture of collective responsibility for improving learning for all students as identified in the OECD report, *Improving Schools in Wales: an OECD perspective*. The same report notes that professional learning in Wales is underdeveloped.

17 Furlong suggests that the government should fund five higher education institutions to be centres of pedagogical excellence, each with strong links to the provision of teacher education. We believe that a designation of centre of pedagogical excellence should be the gold standard for Professional Learning Alliances, so that pedagogical excellence is defined and driven by the profession in a self-improving system. A strong strategic partnership with a higher education institution would by definition be a key part of a Professional Learning Alliance's capacity to achieve this status. Furlong proposes that the government establishes a 'Teacher Education Accreditation Board' within the Education Workforce Council for Wales. This body could accredit initial teacher education providers and designate centres of pedagogical excellence.

18 This paragraph is adapted from the vision for teacher professionalism outlined on page 6 of the Furlong Report.



Initial teacher education and training (ITET) is grounded in strong pedagogical knowledge, developing the quality of instruction, classroom management and climate, and professional behaviours.¹⁹ ITET has a core curriculum framework that sets out underpinning knowledge that scaffolds both practice and reflection on practice. Teaching is understood to be rooted in a body of knowledge and informed by evidence. ITET is predicated on strong subject knowledge right from early years through to sixth form, and teachers entering the profession have a deep knowledge of the subjects they teach.

Higher education institutions work in partnership with schools through Professional Learning Alliances to ensure that pedagogical practice and skill is anchored in strong theoretical knowledge. Right from the point of entry into the profession, teachers both use and create evidence. They regularly evaluate and use different sorts of evidence relevant to the improvement of practice.

Professional learning is continuous and iterative.²⁰ Professional learning programmes routinely revisit underpinning knowledge to deepen learning and refine practice. There is very little professional learning that is 'one-off', with the exception of information-giving events. Most professional learning programmes are designed over a period of time, are overtly relevant to teachers and involve action research in the classroom, peer learning and accreditation. Teachers work collaboratively with other teachers and other professionals, both day to day and in the development of their practice, and they draw on best practice from across the UK and internationally.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers routinely see themselves as evaluators of their impact on student learning.²¹ They are proactive in taking responsibility. Professional learning is seen as an entitlement only in as much as it enables improvement and innovation that impact on outcomes for students.

Professional knowledge and skill in assessing and enabling students to make progress in their learning is a key aspect of pedagogy, starting with initial teacher education. Assessment is given priority as having a formative role in teaching and learning and is aligned with the purposes of learning. A wide range of assessment techniques are now in use. Teachers now assess student progress confidently, supported by chartered assessors from the profession who work across groups of schools to challenge, support and develop practice.²²

There is a national Evidence Centre for Education²³, funded by endowment from both the English and Welsh Governments, feeding national and international evidence of best practice into the policy-making process at national level and into the professional practice of teachers and school leaders. This is independent of both government and the profession.

The absolute focus on professional skill, the quality of teaching and its impact on student outcomes means that there is now very little poor teaching. High levels of ownership and accountability by teachers and school leaders – which arose through a shift in the locus of responsibility from outside the school system to within it – has made a significant impact on outcomes. Schools and teachers are now mutually accountable and are having a positive impact on outcomes.

Steps for school leaders to take

- Recognise that developing the quality of teachers is one of the most important jobs in the school and make it the starting point that professional learning could be better. Identify a talented school leader and give them the resources to lead on initial teacher education and professional learning. Cultivate peer-led learning – excite teachers about teaching, planning and evaluating their teaching together, observing and learning from each other and sharing what works within or across groups of schools – and recognise that external expertise will be necessary to avoid complacency.
- Work with teachers to develop assessment practice – have one or more of the strongest teachers train to be a chartered assessor and give them influence in the school.
- Take the lead in developing and testing approaches to closing the gap, so that every teacher is engaged in and committed to constant evaluation of evidence and practice is honed and improved on the basis of evidence and growing professional understanding.

19 Coe, R., Aloise, C., Higgins, S and Elliot Major, L. (2014) *What makes great teaching? Review of the underpinning research*. Durham University and the Sutton Trust.

20 This section draws on the work of Philippa Cordingley at CUREE and Timperley, H. (2008) *Teacher professional learning and development*. International Academy of Education, International Bureau of Education, UNESCO.

21 Hattie, J. *Visible Learning for Teachers*, Publisher, p 159ff.

22 Donaldson gives a strong focus to assessment in *Successful Futures* with 19 of the 68 recommendations relating to assessment. Strengthening evaluation and assessment is also a key recommendation in the OECD report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*. Our proposal for a division of the Chartered Institute for Educational Assessors will support the implementation of the recommendations in both reports.

23 The OECD report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, recommends investing in national evaluation and research capacity to strengthen the evidence base for decision making in policy and education practice (p. 109). The same report demonstrates that many countries with high-quality education systems have strong research and evaluation capacity (p. 105).

- Anticipating Professional Learning Alliances, consider how your school will group and develop a formal relationship with a higher education institution. Encourage teachers to undertake research and use a range of credible evidence to inform their practice.

Steps for governing bodies to take

- Ensure that there is sufficient and effective investment in professional learning for all staff that impacts positively on learner outcomes, and ensure that developing professionalism is a key strategic priority.

Steps that ASCL will take

- Work with the Welsh Government to develop the specification and core functions for Professional Learning Alliances.
- Work with the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors to establish a division in Wales.
- Work with the Welsh Government to establish a profession-led commission to revise the teacher standards.
- Work with research associations to develop evidence-informed assessment reform.
- Develop a specification for an Evidence Centre for Education.
- Use the systemic review of professional learning being undertaken for the Teacher Development Trust to publish guidance for schools.

Steps for the Welsh Government to take

- Launch a programme of Professional Learning Alliances with five core functions to build system capacity for professional education and professionally orientated research capacity.
- Establish a profession-led commission to revise the teacher standards.
- Revise the accreditation criteria which focus in detail on the nature of university/school partnerships and which give schools leading responsibilities in key aspects of ITE programmes.
- Establish a 'Teacher Education Accreditation Board' within the Education Workforce Council for Wales, including representation from the profession, sending a strong message about the profession itself taking a lead role in its own professional education.
- Support the establishment of the Chartered Institute for Educational Assessors in Wales to strengthen assessment practice and support the implementation of the recommendations in the Donaldson report.
- Work with the profession to establish an Evidence Centre for Education, which will be entirely independent of government.



Element Two: Curriculum, assessment and qualifications

Our vision

Professor Donaldson's wide-ranging and powerful review of the curriculum back in 2015 unleashed a huge energy in the profession. The whole education system in Wales was mobilised around a common mission and has collectively decided to move away from the mechanistic view of the curriculum as a narrow framework of subject content. The alternative view that Donaldson proposed was embraced with passion and commitment: the school curriculum in Wales is now truly the sum of learning experiences and assessment activities planned in pursuit of the agreed purposes of education.

Schools now confidently determine their own curriculum within a broad national framework which has brought creativity, dynamism and relevance into curriculum development. School leaders have much greater autonomy in determining the curriculum for their own school or group of schools. The curriculum in Welsh schools is broad and deep, embracing knowledge, skills and qualities.

The school curriculum is based on strong principles of curriculum design: authentically rooted in Welsh values and culture, evidence-based, relevant to the needs of today, inclusive, ambitious and based on the principle of subsidiarity. It empowers young people to prepare confidently for the challenges of their future lives and engages them.²⁴

At the core of the education system is a strong belief in embracing Welsh culture and language. Wales is a bilingual country and this is central to education policy. The profession quickly got to grips with the quality issues in the teaching of Welsh identified back in 2013. There is now wide acceptance of the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and school leaders have worked together to address the quality of Welsh language teaching. This has not been achieved by central prescription from the Welsh Government but rather through various profession-led initiatives. These have included joint work between Welsh-medium, bilingual and English-medium schools; links with outside agencies that have supported teaching, learning and the provision of resources in Welsh and modern foreign languages; and the use of technologies.

Leadership of the reform process and curriculum and assessment arrangements is now provided by an arms-length body – an independent commission for curriculum review.²⁵

This body has overseen the change process, set a firm but measured pace and simultaneously built professional capacity. It has commissioned independent evaluation arrangements to monitor the effectiveness of the new approach to curriculum and the change process.²⁶

The change strategy is a shining example of the Welsh Government's commitment to a school-led, self-improving system and the principle of subsidiarity – central prescription was eschewed in favour of devolved decision making to the most immediate level consistent with its implementation and to the place closest to students, such as to school leaders.

It is now commonplace for a curriculum vision and strong pedagogical models to be at the heart of improvement and innovation. Young people gain the competencies and dispositions that prepare them to be creative, connected and collaborative, as well as healthy, holistic human beings who not only contribute to but also create the common good in today's knowledge-based creative, interdependent world.²⁷ There is a strong collective aspiration to develop our children as leaders within this culture of creativity and self-improvement so that they have the initiative, skills and attributes needed to sustain system leadership.

The use of technologies and digital literacy both within the curriculum and within schools has increased exponentially through unleashing the power of groups of schools working together in Professional Learning Alliances. Some alliances have led the way in developing powerful pedagogical models of teaching and learning, enabled and accelerated by digital tools and resources. The most successful of these are now designated as centres of pedagogical excellence, specifically for their work on technologies and digital literacy.

An equitable education system ensures that the personal characteristics of learners do not limit their education opportunities and outcomes. Back in 2015, this was a real problem.²⁸ A growth mindset and positive psychology now permeates school communities – adults have an unwavering belief that all children can succeed, regardless of perceptions about innate intelligence, or economic background.²⁹

An independent qualifications regulator, established in 2015, sets the standards for awarding organisations to meet when they design, deliver and award regulated qualifications. The regulator is independent of the profession and government – it exists to ensure world-class qualifications in Wales.

24 These principles are based on Donaldson's principles of curriculum design on page 14 of *Successful Futures*.

25 Based on recommendation 56 in the Donaldson report, the Welsh Government announced an all-Wales partnership with local authorities, regional consortia, Estyn, leading academics, employers, Welsh Government and other key stakeholders. This is, in effect, our proposal for an independent commission. We would strongly propose that school leaders, governors, teachers and parents/ carers are included in the partnership.

26 Based on recommendations 54 and 55 of the Donaldson report.

27 Fullan, M. and Langworthy, M. (2014) *A Rich Seam - How New Pedagogies Find Deep Learning*, Pearson, p.2

28 *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective* provides robust evidence of this problem on page 21.

29 Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House



Research and evidence has helped to inform curriculum and qualification reform that begun in 2015. It has been strongly focused on the four purposes of the curriculum:

- children and young people who are ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society³⁰

In this way, assessment and qualification reform have appropriately followed the curriculum and the outcomes Wales is seeking in an educated 19 year-old.

Gaining in confidence, the profession initiated productive dialogue with higher-performing jurisdictions from whom we wished to learn about curriculum and pedagogy and who in turn wished to learn from us about developing a wider skill set. Wales is now recognised for performing highly in core areas.

Steps for school leaders to take

- Develop a bold curricular vision and pedagogical model that will suit the school context – not a pragmatic or instrumentalist response to qualification reform and accountability measures but rather a curriculum which builds towards the four purposes defined by Donaldson:
 - young people who are ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives
 - enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work
 - ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world
 - healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society
- Consider the use of technologies both within the curriculum and within schools. Develop and test models of teaching and learning, enabled and accelerated by increasingly pervasive digital tools and resources. Build a strategy for digital literacy within your school – and possibly across your group of schools.
- Build a culture of curriculum design and development across the school or schools – enable middle leaders to work with each other and across schools and groups of schools to develop subject curricula.
- Determine how to improve the quality of Welsh language teaching. Put in place a specific improvement plan built around a range of local solutions.
- Celebrate provision in the school – how it reflects the way you see the fundamental purpose of education and how it will prepare students for life in modern Wales and in a global society.
- Build an assessment strategy around a growth mindset and positive psychology – make it a priority to challenge any and all perceptions about innate ability or low expectations.
- Engage staff and students in a discussion about the world students will enter – help teachers to think about what students will need to be successful in the 21st century, and then how that might impact on what they do in their classrooms.

Steps for governing bodies to take

- Determine as part of the school vision, the provision and how it prepares students to gain the competencies and dispositions that prepare them to be creative, connected and collaborative adults who are able to make a positive contribution to society.

Steps that ASCL will take

- Develop guidance to support school leaders to develop a robust, well-evidenced and principled curriculum philosophy.
- Share research evidence and support school leaders to improve expertise and capacity in curriculum design through guidance and ASCL Professional Development (ASCL PD) programmes, which embody the principle that assessment is driven by curriculum.

30 This is a strong endorsement of Donaldson's powerful articulation of the purposes of the curriculum (page 29ff).



- Work with the Welsh Government and the qualifications regulator on curriculum and qualification reform so that they are consistently high-quality and world-class.

Steps for the Welsh Government to take

- Work with the qualifications regulator and the profession to reform the curriculum and Welsh qualifications in line with the principles in the Donaldson report.
- Work with the professional and subject associations, higher education and employers to establish the independent commission for curriculum review. This body should oversee the change process, set a firm but measured pace and simultaneously build professional capacity. It should also have responsibility for commissioning independent evaluation arrangements to monitor the effectiveness of the new approach to curriculum and the change process.



Element Three: Funding and devolution

Our vision

The consortia have blossomed into a full-blown, coherent and sustainable self-improving system with strong and clearly defined school-led features, which include a growing emphasis on school-to-school collaboration and a recognition that expertise lies within and across schools.

In 2015, the middle tier between the Welsh Government and schools was still not efficient in bringing about the necessary transformation in standards.³¹ School leaders worked with the government to remove duplication and ensure robust leadership and governance. There is now a synergised, leaner and logical system of support to schools with clarity about employer functions and executive powers of intervention. The consortia designate Professional Learning Alliances – federations of schools working together to deliver core system functions.³²

Rationalising the middle tier released significant efficiencies and a drive to subsidiarity. The efficiencies released by removing duplication were devolved to schools through a new national funding formula.³³ Annual grants that created a problem for financial stability have all gone. To achieve economies of scale, funding is devolved to the consortia through a national formula, with a requirement on the consortia to use a national funding formula to devolve almost all funding to schools on the principle of subsidiarity. School funding is now sufficient, equitable and sustainable.

A lean middle tier in the form of the consortia focuses appropriately on schools where standards are not yet sufficiently secure. Swift intervention is taken where there is institutional failure. School improvement is now driven through school-to-school support. Improvement and advisory functions outside of schools are now rare – the exception rather than the rule.

In 2016, partnerships of schools in the form of Professional Learning Alliances began to proliferate quickly as the profession stepped forward to lead the system. This was an explicit feature of the drive to subsidiarity. These partnerships have built the scale and capacity to take on system roles, like the capacity for initial teacher education, sustainable professional learning within and across schools, and research and development working closely with higher education institutions.

However, the problem of scale and the sustainability of small stand-alone institutions, particularly small primary schools, in a tightening fiscal climate was unresolved. Schools had to make some changes. Smaller schools (both primary and secondary) realised that they were not sustainable as stand-alone institutions. There is now the beginning of a move towards formal federations with shared governance arrangements³⁴.

Financial accountability is ensured through annual, independent audit that checks financial controls, systems, transactions and risks. School accounts are publicly available. Finance directors are considered to be important senior leaders in schools and groups of schools.

Steps for school leaders to take

- Build local capacity for groups of schools to work together.

Steps for governing bodies to take

- Take a hard look at the school's financial position. Model the finances over a three to five-year period – consider whether the organisation is sustainable in its current form and what action needs to be taken if it is not. Develop a shadow financial model that calculates and demonstrates a minimum sufficiency to inform strategic decision making.

31 We are aware that there is a current consultation on options for local government reform. The current structure is failing to deliver quality services across Wales, with education services still in special measures in several authorities. KPMG estimates that the current system is costing council taxpayers £151 million on duplicated administrative services per year.

32 The Welsh Government has launched a programme of pioneer schools to design and develop the curriculum framework and lay the foundations for change by ensuring all practitioners have access to effective professional learning, supporting them to realise the new curriculum. Our proposal for Professional Learning Alliances embraces this but goes beyond an individual school. Research has shown that professional learning is most powerful when it is shared across schools through collaboration and peer learning.

33 Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective outlines the international evidence that a well-designed funding formula, which takes into account the various school variables, is the most efficient, stable and transparent method of funding schools compared to administrative discretion funding, which in Wales has been delivered through local authorities in a largely unaccountable way. The OECD report points to excessive bureaucracy and inefficiency creating real constraints on the school system. This also resonates with the Commission on Public Governance Delivery which called for a simplification of funding arrangements and a focus on achieving outcomes (Welsh Government, 2014).

34 The OECD report, Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective, evidences that school federation is a more formal way of extending collaboration and promoting closer working relationships (p. 77).



Steps that ASCL will take

- Work with the Welsh Government to support the development of the consortia.
- Work with the Welsh Government to deliver an equitable, sufficient and fair national funding formula.

Steps for the Welsh Government to take

- Consider primary legislation to establish Professional Learning Alliances – groups of schools working together in soft federations to take on specified system roles: initial teacher education; continuous professional learning; leadership development; supporting weaker schools in the system through school-to-school support and research and development.
- Use the efficiencies released from the process of local government reform to develop and implement a national funding formula that is equitable at the point of delivery, sufficient and sustainable and weighted appropriately to those students with the greatest need.



Element Four: Accountability

Our vision

Accountability is the obligation of an individual and organisation to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner. The highest form of accountability is the individual's professional accountability for the quality of his or her own work and to the people who the profession serves. In a self-improving system, we believe that teachers and school leaders are agents of their own accountability.

While this is the highest form of accountability, government does have a legitimate role in determining a public accountability framework because schools are publicly funded institutions and government is rightfully accountable to the electorate for the outcomes of education.

Back in 2015, the accountability framework was confused with many separate bodies reporting on school performance in different ways: Estyn, local authorities, the consortia and the Welsh Government's school categorisation. These reporting and accountability systems were not always aligned.

The Welsh Government acted quickly in 2016 to create a coherent, *slim, smart and stable* accountability framework with a small number of ambitious goals, including a nationally determined progress measure to incentivise improvement.³⁵ The Welsh Government is committed to the stable core of measures in the national accountability framework and is confident that these are sophisticated enough to reach valid and reliable conclusions about a school's performance when it is inspected.

There is an expectation that governing bodies develop smart measures of performance for each of the school's strategic priorities and hold leaders to account for these. These now include but are not constrained by the government's measures. Governors and leaders are respectful of the external accountability framework but are now much more ambitious than the government. They are explicit and eloquent about their vision and the measures that will evidence success.

In many schools, innovations in the use of open data have helped to empower parents and the community.³⁶ These schools have reconfigured complex data so that it is genuinely useful to parents/guardians and other community members in terms of accountability, voice and choice. It is increasingly a parental and community expectation that schools provide their data in open, accessible and meaningful ways.

Accountability is an aspect of good governance of the system. For school leaders, accountability is the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for outcomes and encompasses the obligation to report, explain and be answerable for those outcomes. A self-improving system is not a self-serving system. Thus, inspection is focused on accountability to the public who are the users of the system and to government.

Under a new chief inspector, Estyn responded to this new accountability culture by considering actively what inspection looks like in a self-improving system. Estyn is clear that it acts on behalf of parents, politicians and the wider electorate. The inspectorate reports directly to Senedd in relation to the quality of educational provision in Wales.

School leaders and the governing body have an 'account-giving' relationship with the inspectorate in that they must give account of their actions and decisions to ensure good outcomes for all children and young people in their institution. School leaders give account based on their self-evaluation and their improvement plans. Inspection focuses on a school's self-evaluation and capacity to improve, but there is no longer a statutory requirement to use a particular form of self-evaluation. How a school evaluates itself is for school leaders to decide.

Inspection reports judge how effectively school leaders drive ambition and make provision in their schools to ensure that all students and groups of students make progress in their learning and leave school with good qualifications, ready for life in modern Wales and in a global society. Inspection reaches conclusions about a school's capacity to improve but it has no improvement role. It also has no role in making judgements about processes other than the statutory health and safety and safeguarding processes.

Steps for school leaders to take

- Take ownership of accountability. In addition to the government's accountability measures, define performance measures that demonstrate whether the school is achieving its own vision and aims. Build capacity to use and interrogate data to create a rich picture. Focus on continuous improvement and doing things in a better way.
- Experiment with open-data methodologies to make your data genuinely useful to parents/guardians and other community members.

35 The OECD report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, recommends that the DfES should identify a small number of clear, high priority and measurable objectives for improvement and pursue these over time. These should be related to the core of education – learning – and be ambitious and realistic (p. 128).

36 Open Public Service Network (2013) *Empowering Parents, Improving Accountability*. http://www.thersa.org/___data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1529848/RSA_OPSN_EmpoweringParentsImprovingAccountability.pdf



- Free teachers from all unnecessary fear, uncertainty and doubt about inspection and/or myths about what they believe inspectors want to see – build their confidence to focus on developing professional knowledge and skill rather than a narrow compliance culture. Build a culture of learned resourcefulness, optimism and hopefulness.
- Build capacity and develop a plan to deal with in-school variation.
- Develop governors' understanding of accountability measures – build their capacity as agents of accountability so that they are able to challenge you and tell the story of the school's performance and areas for improvement confidently.

Steps for governing bodies to take

- Develop intelligent measures of performance for each of the school's strategic priorities and hold leaders to account for these.
- Ensure that external data is scrutinised and that there is a secure understanding of how the school is benchmarked.

Steps that ASCL will take

- Work with the government to develop a slim, smart and stable intelligent accountability framework, including an agreed progress measure that will be in place for at least the term of government.
- Work with the Open Public Services Network (OPSN) to develop guidance on open data.
- Work with Estyn to define an inspection system and framework that is fit for purpose in a self-improving system with the features described in the vision.

Steps for the Welsh Government to take

- Work with the profession to decide on a slim, smart and stable intelligent accountability framework with a small number of ambitious goals.
- Work with the inspectorate and profession to reform school inspection with the design features articulated in the vision.

Element Five: Scrutiny, intervention and support

Our vision

Scrutiny of performance of all schools in a region is now undertaken smartly and promptly by the relevant consortium. The in-coming government in 2016 worked quickly to rationalise, simplify and make more efficient the arrangements for scrutiny, intervention and support. The costly, fragmented bureaucratic infrastructures were streamlined and simplified in the interests of efficiency and coherence.

The performance of all schools regardless of structure is now overseen by the relevant consortium director. Each region understands its schools, is lean and efficient and committed to transparency.

Each consortium director is required to publish an annual report outlining the impact of their regional improvement strategy. They hold public office and are publicly accountable. There is a strong commitment to transparency – the system is prepared to open itself up to scrutiny, publishes open data and ‘open sources’ its processes, practices and ideas.

In a system of early intervention, where a school is judged not to be delivering an acceptable quality of education (on grounds of standards assessed over time, a breakdown in leadership or governance and/or safety of students or staff), the consortium director issues a warning notice.

If the school does not have the capacity to secure its own improvement, the consortium director intervenes. Thus, the consortium director has executive powers, unlike the inspectorate and can exercise powers of intervention, removing the governing body and/or requiring a school to work in partnership with another named school.

Support to schools needing to secure improvements usually takes the form of school-to-school support brokered by the consortium director.³⁷

In a system of earned autonomy, the consortia do not interfere or intervene in schools with good and outstanding outcomes. However, the consortia also have a role in capacity building through the Professional Learning Alliances in their region.

As this system embedded, fewer and fewer schools were judged to require improvement or indeed, special measures. Where they were, there was stronger intervention and quicker exit.

The system improved.

Steps for school leaders to take

- Build system leadership capacity. Work with other schools in your area to agree and implement strategic approaches for addressing systemic challenges, such as professional learning, leadership development and succession planning, subject networks and school-to-school support, if these are not yet in place.
- Ensure the success of emerging school-led structures like the Professional Learning Alliances and consortia by engaging actively with them.

Steps for governing bodies to take

- Ensure that your institution is building system leadership capacity. Consider whether this should be a strategic priority for your school.

Steps that ASCL will take

- Work with the Welsh Government to develop the consortia as fully-fledged structures strong enough to lead a self-improving system.

Steps for the Welsh Government to take

- Ensure that the consortia are aligned with local government reform such that there is a synergised, leaner and logical system of support and challenge to schools.

³⁷ The OECD report, *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, recommends that a Welsh strategy for school-to-school support and collaboration is developed (p. 84). We see this being developed and implemented through the Professional Learning Alliances. This is in line with the OECD recommendation for an architecture where schools are able to select appropriate partners in an atmosphere of transparency, awareness and support. However, for low-performing schools, we believe that school-to-school support may be brokered by the consortium director.



Element Six: Leadership and governance

Our vision

School leaders, sensing an emergent landscape with the powerful messages from the Welsh Government about leaders of education working together in a self-improving system, stepped forward into system leadership roles.

Back in 2015, the lack of a shared language of leadership and narrative about the imperative to lead the system stifled school leaders in Wales. School leaders began working together to define the leadership behaviours necessary to move the system to great.

School leaders were clear about their responsibilities to determine the priorities for their own institutions. They undertook to work together through Professional Learning Alliances to lead the education of new and existing staff and actively intervened to mitigate the impact of disadvantage.³⁸ But this was not enough.

School leaders realised that the only way the Welsh education system could make the jump to the next level was the point at which the system came to rely on the values and behaviours of its educators to propel continuous improvement. They drew on the international evidence which demonstrates the need for the system to shift from central direction (or 'mandating adequacy') to 'unleashing greatness' in schools themselves³⁹ – working collaboratively to improve the quality both of teachers entering the profession and existing teachers, cultivating peer learning within schools and between them, encouraging innovation to discover future leading practices, and ultimately ownership of outcomes and the quality of education by the profession.

A shared policy narrative emerged which placed system leadership and school-to-school support at the centre of educational reform.⁴⁰ Wales began to look beyond the UK to learn from the best international practice. Wales learned from a range of practices in high-performing jurisdictions. Notably, Wales learned from Ontario, Canada, about a model of the profession taking ownership of leadership qualifications and standards. Thus, leaders in England and Wales worked together to create a profession-led Foundation for Leadership in Education.

There was collective agreement that the Foundation for Leadership in Education would develop and promote leadership standards; accredit and quality assure leadership development programmes;⁴¹ curate and disseminate evidence on professional knowledge and leadership effectiveness; promote leadership succession planning; and facilitate constructive dialogue between education leaders and policy makers, creating a stronger sense of collective endeavour and shared vision.

Governance is a clear aspect of leadership. In 2015, governance was not consistently strong. The Welsh Government determined to review the governance framework and made it more flexible to enable governing bodies' freedom to determine their own composition so that they could recruit governors with the right skills and experience. The Welsh Government accepted the need to move away from central prescription in determining the number of governors and nature of governing bodies.

There is a widely established culture in governing bodies of continuously striving to develop and improve governance. The importance of governing bodies with the right skills to develop the vision and aspiration for a school or group of schools and to ensure an appropriate balance of support and challenge is widely recognised. A successful campaign targeting social responsibility schemes to recruit governors from the wider educational, financial and managerial sectors supported this.

All governing bodies carefully plan succession – normally no single governor spends more than two terms of office on one governing body. Governing bodies routinely employ paid, professional clerks with a secure understanding of the law and duties of the governing body.

Governing bodies are more skilled and effective, clear in their vision and focused on a small number of strategic aims that matter most.

Leaders (including governors) in Wales have taken a great leap forwards. The move away from central prescription has unleashed professionalism, creativity and innovation. A strong sense of collective endeavour shapes and drives system improvements.

38 *Qualified for Life* lists these as the actions leaders should take (page 21). Our proposition is that these actions, while important, are not sufficient for a self-improving system to emerge in Wales.

39 Barber, M. and Mourshed, M. and Chikioke, C. 2010, *How the World's Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better*, London, McKinsey & Company

40 This is a key policy driver identified in the OECD report: *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD perspective*, page 84ff.

41 While we value the NPQH as an accredited programme, we do not believe it should be the only programme for school leaders. The proposed Foundation for Leadership in Education will develop a suite of leadership development programmes appropriate to school leaders at different points in their career. We also do not see leadership development strategy as a task for government – this should be profession-led.

Steps for school leaders to take

- Step up to the leadership challenge – work across the sector and with schools locally to begin to develop the professional structures and groups that will lead the system.

Steps for governing bodies to take

- Review your governing body – if necessary, commission an independent review of governance. Consider whether the governing body has the right composition, number skills and experience to set the strategic direction for the school.
- Ensure the governing body is clear in its vision and focused on a small number of strategic aims that matter most.

Steps that ASCL will take

- Establish a profession-led Foundation for Leadership in Education that is intended to:
 - develop and promote leadership standards
 - accredit and quality assure leadership development programmes
 - curate and disseminate evidence on professional knowledge and leadership effectiveness
 - promote leadership succession planning
 - host constructive dialogue between education leaders and policy makers, creating a stronger sense of collective endeavour and shared vision

Steps for the Welsh Government to take

- Review the governance framework and make it more flexible to enable governing bodies' freedom to determine their own composition so that they can recruit governors with the right skills and experience.
- Move away from central prescription in determining the number of governors and nature of governing bodies.



Postscript

Leading the change will involve a mindset – our education system is not composed of a series of givens by those outside the profession, to which we are required to respond and by which we are constrained. Rather, our leadership must be active, passionate, ethical and driven by our collective dedication and effort. We need to break the ‘mind-forged manacles’ that chain us to accept certain beliefs or ways of doing things.

We said in our foreword that we want a system in which all children and young people achieve. We set out a series of principles that underpin our blueprint. The blueprint is a re-imagining of education in Wales – a move away from prescription to a profession-led system that is evidence-informed, innovative and ethical.

The central premise of the blueprint is that deep and sustained reform of our education system will not come from outside the profession.

Leora Cruddas

ASCL Director of Policy



Appendix A: Architecture of a self-improving system in Wales

Proposed profession-led structures

Enabling the profession to enhance professional learning, lead the system and speak authoritatively to government.

Professional Learning Alliances: Groups of schools that work together to provide high-quality professional education to new and experienced school staff. Typically led by an outstanding school, they are a group of schools working together in a soft federation with other schools and strategic partners like higher education institutions. They have a core set of functions that include initial teacher education; continuous professional learning; leadership development; supporting weaker schools in the system through school-to-school support and research and development – again in partnership with a higher education institution. These five core functions are intended to provide a powerful incentive and purpose for deep partnership between and among schools.

Foundation for Leadership in Education: Led by a peer-elected board, the leadership foundation is intended to be a profession-led national body responsible for setting headteacher and leadership standards and licensing a suite of accredited leadership programmes. It is envisaged the foundation would operate in both England and Wales.

Scrutiny, intervention and support

The middle tier between education provision and government.

Consortia: With governing bodies of headteachers and democratically elected representatives. Consortia directors are responsible for scrutiny of and, where necessary, intervention in all schools in the area. Appointment of the consortium director is made by the governing board.

Regulation, inspection and evidence

Independent of the profession and government.

Qualifications regulator: An independent body responsible for ensuring world-class qualifications and sets the standards for awarding organisations to meet when they design, deliver and award regulated qualifications. The chief regulator works with government and the profession to deliver qualification reform.

Inspectorate (Estyn): A Crown body, the inspectorate acts on behalf of parents and politicians. The inspectorate reports directly to Senedd in relation to the quality of educational provision.

Evidence Centre for Education: Synthesises and interprets research and evidence and advises government, including the Welsh Government, on evidence-based policy and the profession on evidence-based practice.

Independent commission for curriculum review: An arms-length body providing leadership of the reform process and curriculum and assessment arrangements and taking forward Donaldson's recommendations. School leaders, governors, teachers, parents, industry and politicians are represented on the commission.

Education Workforce Council for Wales: The registration and regulation of the school and FE workforce in Wales. It is proposed to establish a Teacher Education Accreditation Board within the EWC – this body could accredit initial teacher education providers and designate centres of pedagogical excellence.

Government

Accountable to the electorate - sets the policy framework and ensures high standards of education, ensuring that the system serves all equally well.

Education Minister: The senior political postholder responsible for the work of the Department for Education and Skills in Wales.

Department for Education and Skills Director

General: The most senior civil servant, charged with running the department on a day-to-day basis.



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